

ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

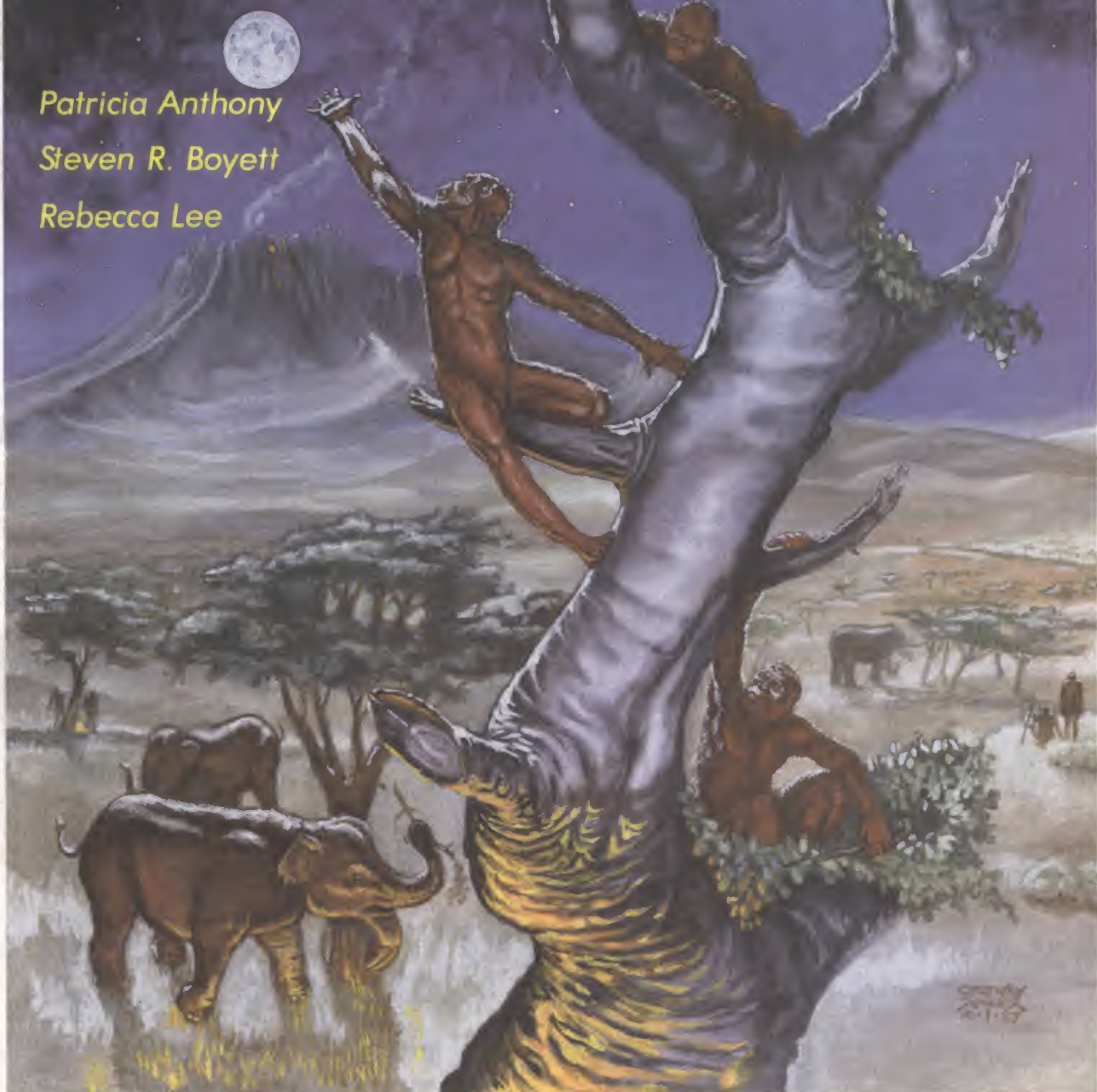
Tales of the Human Kind

Nov.-Dec. 1987/\$2.50

Patricia Anthony

Steven R. Boyett

Rebecca Lee



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Aboriginal Science Fiction (ISSN 0895-3198) is published bimonthly by Absolute Entertainment Inc. in January, March, May, July, September, and November for \$12 a year. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* has editorial offices at 12 Emeline St., Woburn, MA 01801. (All mail should be directed to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction* P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, Massachusetts 01888-0849.) Second Class Postage Rates paid at Woburn, MA, and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Aboriginal Science Fiction* P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. The single copy price is \$2.50 (plus 50 cents postage/handling). Subscriptions are: \$12 for 6 issues, \$22 for 12 and \$30 for 18. Canadian subscriptions are: \$15 for 6 issues, \$28 for 12 issues and \$39 for 18 issues. Foreign subscriptions are: \$17 for 6 issues, \$32 for 12 issues, and \$45 for 18 issues. Material from this publication may not be reprinted or used in any form without permission. Copyright © 1987 *Aboriginal Science Fiction* and

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BOOK REVIEWS: Publishers who would like books to be reviewed should send one copy to Darrell Schweitzer, 113 Deepdale Road, Strafford, PA 19087; and one copy to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction* P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849.

Aboriginal Science Fiction would like to thank the *Daily Times Chronicle*, and various members of SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) for their encouragement and assistance.

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A Message From Our Alien Publisher

A Matter of Trust

Since my last report, the human beings have celebrated a rite called a "stock market crash," an event by which some of them agree to relinquish prosperity for insolvency. I have been unable to understand the exact mechanism by which this rite takes place. It begins with an announcement that some firms are worth less than formerly. This reduction in value takes place even though their productive capacities have not changed. They have the same number of employees after the announcement as before, the same stocks of raw materials, the same inventories, computer systems, buildings, and customer contracts. Yet everyone agrees to this general reduction in value, and those who own some portion of the designated firms lose wealth by the announcement. To puzzle out this conversion of prosperity to poverty, I looked into the subject of money.

Money is used by nearly all human societies, from the stock exchanges of industrialized nations to the hunting and gathering clans of the Earth's less populated regions. Human beings evaluate transactions in livestock, cowrie shells, gems, compressed tea, precious metals, feathers, copper ingots, coins, slips of paper, and plastic cards. In fact, if human beings create a society without money (as sometimes happens in prisons and utopian communes), they will inevitably designate a new money, creating currency of everyday commodities, such as cigarettes, candy, or canned food. But currency is the smallest part of the human supply of money. Most of

the world's money today has no physical existence at all and manifests itself merely as information, assuming the form of messages and instructions to debit or credit various accounts.

While money can take almost any form, its meaning is always the same. A quantity of money is a promise, a promise to be honored by a whole human society. The promise of an individual human being, you see, is usually worth less than the breath it takes to utter it. That is why they use money: otherwise, they would never be able to reliably transact any business. Since human beings cannot trust each other, they have at least agreed to trust in money and to accept it as a standard against which everything is measured.

You will get a much deeper picture of money and what it means to human beings when you read the attachments to this report: *The Sharper Image Catalog*, the collected writings of a novelist named Harold Robbins, the annual report of a large company that manages something called "mutual funds," a collection of newspaper stories about a commercial enterprise known as "PTL," and a supposed nonfiction book called *How to Get Rich in Real Estate*. I wanted to include some economics books, but I could understand none of them and assumed they would be of no use to you. Economics is the special area of human study devoted to money, but it (like the education theory I described in a previous report) is a hodge-podge of superstition and intellectual poses calculated to achieve little beyond the enrichment of

economists.

The "Crash of '87" caused the destruction of no goods, and it did nothing to disable the means of production, yet it completely eliminated the stock of wealth held by a large number of people and organizations. Do not mistake my meaning: these people have suffered no physical hardship. Their houses have not fallen down, their belongings have not disappeared, their mental faculties have remained intact, they have not (to all appearances, anyway) been enslaved. Yet they agree to having been "wiped out" by the crash, that they will give up most of their belongings, that they will indenture themselves to their creditors or seek protection from them in the courts, and that they will live in straitened conditions until they can convince the rest of humanity that they have regained some of this imaginary wealth they are supposed to have lost. It would be humorous if it hadn't had such tragic results for so many people. Pension funds (and thereby their beneficiaries) took a particularly hard beating.

We have met no other creatures in this galaxy who are so willing to bind themselves by the rules of their own games. Even the Rizz'm of Aldebaran 3, with their time entitlements, seem normal by comparison. At least the Rizz'm return all debentures to their lessors on hatching day. Human beings do not observe any regular redistributions, and will preserve their economic inequities over generations! With the implication of

(Continued to page 43)



EDITOR'S NOTES

By Charles C. Ryan

On Becoming a Writer

The way things look now, we are certain we will have a slick cover for the next issue — our first in 1988 — and we might even have an added surprise.

The January issue *will* feature a novelette by Ben Bova, the former editor of *Analog*, and an author in his own right — but that's not the surprise. So keep on the lookout for our January issue — we think you'll be pleased.

There are a number of reasons for getting myself involved in this crazy business of editing a science fiction magazine. I won't bore you with all the details, but among those reasons are the facts that I enjoy reading SF and I think the short story is a particular art form which needs as much encouragement as it can get. Tied to that is the equally important need to encourage new writers.

Perhaps the most common question asked of editors at science fiction conventions is: "How can I become a (science fiction) writer?"

The answer is simple: "Write."

I know many people who "talk" writing, but who, sad to say, will never be writers because that's all they do is talk. Oh sure, every once and a while they sit down and pen a few finely turned phrases, but it's often weeks or months between such phenomena.

They haven't understood that the first, and foremost maxim for would-be writers is to write every day, at least an hour, preferably much more.

I say "writer" as opposed to "author" because a writer is one

who writes, while an author is a professionally published writer who has readers other than his or her immediate friends and family, and someone who manages to get his or her work published more than once.

Some argue writing is an art, and I wouldn't fight with them, but it is even more a craft — the important distinction being that a craft is more easily taught than an art.

Equipped with the basic skills (in English grammar), any insightful person can become a writer. It just takes diligence and persistence.

Persistence is important in the face of the numerous (seemingly unending) rejections novice writers can expect to receive as they start out on a free-lance career.

Here at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, we actively encourage new writers and already have helped several make their "first sale."

And, to show you just how crazy we really are, we even go so far as to endorse the competition, so to speak, or any other effort which actively promotes writing and encourages new writers.

Someone who has actually written on a daily basis for a year or two but finds little or no headway being made toward that first sale, should seriously consider looking for and joining a writers' group. Be warned, however, that writing groups are a form of the traditional rite of passage. There be pain and scars lying in wait for those whose craft isn't adequately honed. Such groups also winnow the faint of heart and pen rather quickly and do part of an

(nasty) editor's job.

In the absence of a local group of ghouls to critique a novice's work, there is always the option of attending a writer's workshop. Some SF-related workshops include Clarion, Clarion West, and The Writers of the Future workshops.

None is for a rank beginner. These workshops are for those who have given it a try for some time and feel a need to sharpen their skills, to bridge the gap between a nice rejection letter and a sale and — the ultimate goal — publication.

Most require the submission of one or more samples of a writer's work and an application fee (often refundable if the application is not accepted) and charge tuition. The course is also likely to be much more intense than a local writers workshop or courses run by more commercial organizations. These workshops don't coddle their students.

Clarion West, for instance, recently announced the opening of a new workshop at Seattle Central Community College next summer, June 19 to July 31, 1988. Only 20 applicants will be accepted for the program which will feature writers-in-residence Orson Scott Card, Elizabeth Lynn, Greg Bear, Joan Vinge, Gardner Dozois and Peter S. Beagle. For more information, write: Clarion West, 340 15th Avenue, Suite 350, Seattle, WA 98112.

Writers of the Future, which does hold workshops, also holds an annual contest which has resulted in several good anthologies.

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ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

Nature Versus Nurture

Consider this in the context of the old nature/nurture debate: Are heroes born or made?

Science has yet to figure out how much of what we are is due to how we were made versus what we've experienced. Science can't answer that any better than literature at this point.

That leaves science fiction writers free to explore the making of heroes. Their advantage is the freedom to vary the circumstances of the individual and the environment to degrees unmatched by "ordinary" fiction.

An example of this is Mary Cochina and her predicament in "Every Sparrow That Falls."

Author Rebecca Lee says she is now working on the novel that goes with "Every Sparrow," and

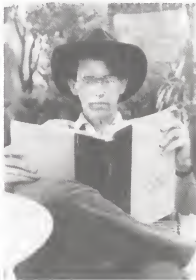


Rebecca Lee

looking for a publisher to go with the novel.

This is her second published short story. The first had the great title, "Walking the Beat on the Outskirts of Hell" for *Fantasy Book*, June 1986.

Lee makes her living as a social worker with the Tennessee



Robert A. Metzger

Department of Human Services and shares her home with her husband, Ronald, a University of Tennessee librarian, her neurotic dachshund, Woody and her MacIntosh computer.

Those will all have to make way for a new addition in April, when the Lees are expecting their first child.

Robert A. Metzger makes his second appearance in *ABO* with "True Magic." Those of you who read Metzger's story "An Unfiltered Man," in our last issue are probably still seeing albacore tuna. Well, get set for lemon yogurt.

On the macro level, Metzger is working on his first book, titled *John Smith and Associates* and looking for a publisher.

On the micro level, physicist Metzger just fabricated a sub-micron 8x8 CMOS multiplier (don't ask) at his job with Hughes

Research Labs in Malibu, Calif.

Both "True Magic" and "Every Sparrow" are illustrated by frequent artist contributor Larry Blamire.

Larry's accomplishments as a playwright and actor are steadily mounting. The latest good news is that his play, "Why?" a drama about Irish street gangs in the 1890s, will be a full production of the Gloucester Stage Company in Gloucester, Mass. during the company's next season.

Blamire will direct the play, which he says is a "big sprawling thing" with more than two dozen characters.

Patricia Anthony's first story for *ABO* was "Blood Brothers" in issue #3, and it earned her recognition from some other professional writers.

Now she gives us "What Brothers Are For," a tale of innocent love and loyalty confronted by the dark shame of adult sins.



Larry Blamire

Anthony got her masters degree at the Universidad de Santa Catarina in Brazil, and notes that "it's amazing how many SF writers have spent time in Brazil. Is it something in the

air?"

Anthony has two teenaged children and a cat who is an "unpleasant diversion from my writing." She got her start as a writer by succumbing to a "wild urge seven years ago," and otherwise

Bradley Hospital, and he is freelancing and "getting ulcers and fallen arches trying to peddle my work to New York book publishers."

Ralph E. Vaughan brings us an alternate universe whose classical proportions are shaken up in "Fluxed in Nova Byzantium."

Vaughan makes his living as a writer and lives in California.

His two latest efforts are "The Shooting of Judge Pierce" (Carelton Publications, 1987) and "Desert Legends" (SJK Enterprises, 1986).

He is working on "The Mystery of the Desert Giants" for Krause Publications and "The Game of Lion and Dragon" for

Espionage magazine, both due out late this year.

One of his stated pet peeves,



Ralph E. Vaughan

small children and teenagers in libraries, strikes a chord with me.

(Continued to page 46)



Patricia Anthony

makes a living working as a sales trainer in the advertising department of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Her story is illustrated by Byron Taylor, who is making his debut in *ABO*.

Taylor's mother was an artist, and he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, with a strong interest in art. After a stint as a surgical technician in the Air Force, he got his bachelors degree at the University of Arkansas.

He then worked several commercial art jobs which earned him a couple of ADDY awards



Byron Taylor

from the Advertising Federation.

Taylor moved to Providence, R.I. with his wife and two children in May. Wife Lynn has a child psychiatry fellowship at

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SCIENCE FICTION CHRONICLE
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Every Sparrow That Falls

By Rebecca Lee

Art By Larry Blamire

This is what they say:

The lost years of Mary Cochinka's life — from the extraordinary genetic accident of the birth of her daughter, Petra, to Mary's re-emergence as a moving force of the New Renaissance — span from age 16 to age 33 or from 2047 to 2064, old style reckoning. While Mary herself has remained silent on the events of this period, she has spoken movingly of life in small towns on the Baja and has attributed much of her later work to the values she formed while working there as a fisher. One may suspect, then, that her young adulthood was spent recovering quietly from the overwhelming grief she felt at the murder of her parents by anti-gene-engineering factions and in amassing the vast amounts of classical learning that would later serve her so well. Unfortunately, her college records of this time have not yet been located; it is this writer's opinion that she attended several colleges in southern California under a variety of names to protect her anonymity.

While others have romanticized the events of her life, it is the hope of this study to examine the psychosocial dynamics of this extraordinary woman: the sources of her strong family ties, the continuing expression of her compassion for others, the sure sense of self she displayed during her public career, and the stated acknowledgment of her special destiny as the bridge between the human cultures. Growing out of the tumult of the Third World War, the Gene Engineering (or "Gengineering," as it is referred to in the popular press) Panics, and the wide spread food riots of the early 2020s and 2030s, Mary Christobal Cochinka is perhaps the "Modern Madonna" that one romantic novelist has labeled her. Her broad popular base of support had its beginnings during this period; it is a sign of the loyalty that she has always inspired in others that none of the people who knew her during this time period would grant interviews to this writer. We can only make conjectures about her life....

—from *Sociology in the New Age*

Chapter 12: "Shaping Forces of the New Renaissance"

by Dr. Alexander Manchip Allen
University of Nuevo Angeles Press,
2105 (o.s.), pp. 308-309.

Now let me tell you the truth.

*** **

My Angel came to me when I was drunk — drunk and staggering home from another night at Miguel's, Petra holding one side of me up, the other side of me wobbling and weaving like a fish brought up too fast from the deep.

It was a fine night and I felt fine.

"Ouch!" Petra squawked. "You're on my tail again!"

I laughed. A human with a tail. What a wonderful idea. I'd have to grow one too. And gills to go with it.

Petra stopped suddenly. I almost fell, but she caught me. She's strong, she is. Fisher strength. Comes from eating fish all the time. I giggled.

Her words quieted me: "We've got company, Mary," she said. "Someone's on our front porch."

I peered into the distance. Petra's eyes are better than mine, even when I'm sober, and especially when I'm not. From the sand dune where we stood, we had a clear view of our house — our four-room shack with a porch out front and a dock out back, surrounded on three sides by rocks and sand with the sea beyond. The path we stood on was the only way in unless you were a mountain goat. This path, and the sea.

Automatically my eyes flicked down to the *Dancer II*. She was still safe in her moorings. Just as we had left her, our morning's catch sold and money in my pockets. Now my pockets were empty but our porch was full: I could barely make out a human outline — someone sitting in the swing. I could just hear the creak-creak of the swing slowly gliding back and forth; there was a tiny pause, and I heard our visitor's feet just touching the porch, just giving enough push to keep the swing going back and forth, back and forth.

Whoever it was was patient. I liked that. I liked that just fine. "C'mon," I tugged on Petra. "Let's go meet our company."

"Mary!" Petra stood her ground. "What if... they're not... friendly?"

"Oh, Lord. Darwinists." And then I was more sober than I wanted to be. I felt the pistol on my hip, loosened the cool metal in the holster I had worn for so long. "Let me go first," I told her softly, staring into eyes that were my color but far, far too large for a human face. "Stay here. If there's trouble, get to the water."

Her twelve-year-old face looked out to the bay, out to the sea beyond, out to where her father's people swam. The look on that face — that scaled face, with



the too-large eyes, the too-hard mouth, the tiny upturned nose, the rudimentary external ears (my ears), with a crown of fin instead of hair — gave lie to her years. She was as old as the sea. She was my daughter.

"Okay, Mary," she said. And I scrambled down the dune alone.

Our visitor sat in the swing, unmoving, as I approached. Moonlight showed me there was another path to my house: the air. It was an Angel on my porch — an Angel, a Flyer, a human genetically endowed with wings.

I reholstered my gun. She might be trouble, but not the kind that could be handled with bullets. "Angel" was an appropriate nickname for this one: she was snowy white from wing tip to wing tip, from cockatoo's crest to feet that would look more comfortable grasping a tree limb than pushing the swing on my front porch. She was as large-eyed as my daughter; only her face and hands were free of the soft feathers. She bore a warrior's blade on her back, the black of the scabbard and the gold of the hilt stark against her softness. Her right wing held the marking bands of the nearest aerie — the Santa Anna Aerie. She was high status, I could see; her bands showed too much gold and silver for her to be just a common Flyer. I felt the remnants of my fine mood and my fine evening collapsing about me. She was too far from home, I knew, for this to be a social call.

She rose from the swing as I mounted the steps, her long feet pressing into the warped boards of the porch, the chain of the swing rattling behind her.

"Mother Mary, help me," she said, in a voice as light as her down, and then the swing completed the arc it had started when she had stood. Wood hit her above the knees; she fell.

I lunged for her, caught her, almost fell on top of her myself. I eased us both the floor. She was light in my arms, light and limp. And silky — her feathers felt like silk to my fingers. Hot silk, silk that breathed, silk that — I saw as I rolled her face-up in my arms — that was at least six months pregnant.

I cursed, long and low. She didn't vanish, or turn into a bug, or fall through a crack in my porch. She laid in my arms, she breathed, and she was beautiful.

And dangerous.

I wanted to cry, I wanted to run. I wanted to have a nice, safe life.... There was a hand on my shoulder. I froze.

"Let's take her inside, Mary," my daughter said. "She needs to be in bed."

Help her, my mind echoed. Yeah. "Get the door," I said, and rose, with a burden as light as feathers and as heavy as lead in my arms.

Straight through the living room past the bookshelves to the kitchen, take a right to my bedroom, avoiding door jambs, sharp corners and missteps: I was on automatic pilot. I laid her in my bed, almost losing her in the king-size sheets and pillows. Petra unbuckled her sword. She almost roused then, but I held her to me and she sighed and relaxed. I laid her down, felt her pulse, watched her breathe. Her heart was beating at 130 times a minute,

respiration 25. And she was hot to the touch. I covered her with a sheet.

"How is she?" Petra asked softly.

"Tired," I said. "Exhausted. I think she's just sleeping."

"Oh." She paused. "What kind of help do you think she needs?"

I met Petra's eyes, then looked away. "Probably more than I can give."

She sighed. "Mother, you make me so mad sometimes! You're either belittling yourself or you're —" she broke off. "I'm sorry."

I tried to ignore the compassion in her voice. "It's okay. Go to bed. We'll find out what this is all about in the morning."

She touched my shoulder, feather-light. I didn't turn to look at her. "Good night, mother," she said softly.

"Night."

Petra ducked out of my room. I heard a splash from the next room as she slid into her tank. I sighed, kept my eyes on the Flyer. A king-sized bed for all six foot four of me, a salt-water tank for my daughter; two necessities for our tumble-down shack of a home. Twenty five feet from the sea and Petra had to have her own "bed," her own room, decorated the way she wanted it. What the hell, she was twelve.

And she was worried about me.

Me: drunk. A stranger she had moved in with only a month ago. I couldn't stop her from following me into town; she couldn't stop me from going into town and pretending to be Chris Bell, human.

Me. And our visitor, the Angel.

They live faster than we do, these Angels. Their metabolism's wound tighter. They live faster, they die sooner, but Lord, how they soar when they fly.

I crept into bed and fell asleep beside her.

And in my dream it was fourteen years ago. I saw Cochín rising up out of the water, sunlight sparkling on his scales 'til he glittered gold. I felt again my love for him, pure and untainted, pure and innocent, pure and deadly. He walked to me, his tiny legs somehow strong on the unforgiving sand. I stood on the porch, unable to move, unable to run to him, unable to even call to warn him away, to go back to the sea that loved him, to go away from me who would kill him. He didn't go back. Maybe he couldn't. He died on the sand again, again trying to breathe harsh air, again trying to love me in his ignorance.

And a new element to this old dream: Flyers flocked down to pick his corpse like vultures.

I awoke then, like I always do, scared and sweating. I was trapped in the twisted covers; I was alone in bed. Moonlight showed me our visitor: she was — perched is the only word — on the foot board of the bed, her feet wrapped around the rail like it was a branch and she a bird.

If she had had her head tucked under one wing I would have screamed. But no; her wings were folded neatly along her back. Her arms were wrapped around her folded legs; her head lay on her knees. She slept.

I knew I could not. I crept out of the bed, thankful for the unyielding oak of the frame. I didn't want to jar her, to wake her; I needed help to be in the right frame of mind. My help was liquid, and it was under the kitchen sink.

Closing the bedroom door behind me, I groped my way to the sink. My bottle was gone.

So was the one over the stove, the one in the broom closet, and the one half empty in the ice box. Petra had declared Prohibition... but there was that one I kept hidden in my bedroom....

The Angel was awake this time, eyes open, feathers silver under the full moon. I went to the nightstand.

"Mother Mary —" she started. Her voice was silver, like bells.

"Don't call me that." I opened the drawer of the nightstand — or tried to. The whole damn drawer was gone.

"Mary Cochinka —"

"Just 'Mary' will be fine." Petra had cleaned me out, emptied all my supplies, in the scrubgrass, no doubt, so my booze wouldn't pollute her precious ocean. Damn.

"Mary, I am sorry for my error. I only wished to pay you proper honor."

"Listen —" I started. "I —" I stopped. She stood up on the bed rail, her wings opening to their fullest. Without a sound, she stepped from the bed — and touched the floor in front of me.

I was half way across the room. Her wingspan must have been at least six and a half feet... yet her head came barely up to my chest.

I knelt before her.

"No —" she said, her tiny hands reaching for me.

I caught her hands, held them in my callused own. "Listen — uh, what is your name?"

"Sparrow," she said softly. "Now, it is Sparrow."

"Sparrow —" my mouth was dry and I wanted a drink. Even water. "Listen, I —"

Her face tightened, and I knew she knew what I was going to say. "I have no wish to be a burden upon you, Mother Mary," she said matter-of-factly. "I can pay my way. My bands — my former aerie's bands are of gold and silver. I'm told they command a high price in certain quarters." All of a sudden she was pleading. "You can sell them. Surely they will pay for my room and board —"

"No." Those bands would buy more food than she could eat in a year. Ten years. "How many people know you're here? How many saw you fly in tonight? One? Two? A dozen? The Darwinists will know a Flyer's out of the aerie in a couple of days, a week at the most! I'm not going to risk my life — or my daughter's life — for anyone." I turned away from her. "You'll leave in the morning."

"Mary —" the voice was broken, broken by the necessity to plead. "I can fly no longer. My child is too heavy within me. I am no longer *tenshi*, no longer considered a Flyer by my people. My vows are broken. My honor is gone. Even my name I have forfeited because I would not accept my fate. I could be killed now and no one would take vengeance for me.



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AO

Please, I beg you. Please, let me stay. Please. I have no place else to go."

I couldn't answer her.

"I am a coward," she said finally. "But perhaps I may still redeem my honor. Excuse my intrusion." She turned to the door.

Dear God, we could use the money from selling those bands. Dear God, they could kill her and no one would care. Dear God, the Darwinists will find out about us.

Dear God, I can't turn her out.

"You'll have to stay inside, all day," I said, my voice stopping her in the doorway. "And this place heats up like an oven."

She nodded, once, slowly, then reached up and with a sharp tug removed the aerie bands from her wing. Blood-warm beaten gold and hammered silver were pressed into my right hand. She knelt before me, bowed her head. "Most worthy woman," she said formally. "Accept this unworthy one's thanks for the sparing of her life."

I turned from her, rage in my heart. "Leave them on the table," I said. "I'll sell them tomorrow."

"Yes, Mother Mary," she said softly.

"Don't call me that!" I whirled to face her. "I don't want your honor!"

She met my anger unflinchingly. "I have no honor left to give you," she said softly. "I am an outcast and you have taken me in. I was trying to thank you in the way of my people, forgetting that I have forsaken them. I regret my error. It will not happen again." She rose smoothly and went into the front room. "I will sleep in here if that is permitted," she said.

I nodded.

"Good night," she said softly.

She closed the door behind her. I heard the soft swoop of her wings; I imagined her settling on top of the couch to rest, her feet curling to grasp the old, faded fabric. "Good night," I said softly. And I cried.

*** **

The next day, as our catch squirmed in our net, Petra told me Sparrow's story, the one the Angel had told her over our kitchen table while I snored in the back room.

She was a warrior, sworn to defend her aerie with her life. But she had gotten pregnant by accident. The obligation to bear this child had robbed her of the life she gloried in: the weight of that child had already taken her from the sky. Sparrow would be grounded for at least four months. Her muscles would atrophy, her tendons shorten, her heart and lungs lose some of their marvelous capacity. She would be able to fly again, of course, but her stamina would be gone. She could never be a warrior. She had fled the aerie, coming to us for whatever dubious help we could give.

*** **

Sparrow made a great difference in our lives. The first day she cleaned the house from top to bottom. She didn't merely pick up all my junk and organize it, she scrubbed the walls, the ceiling, and the floors. She re-alphabetized my books, unfolded all the pages I had turned down, inserting bookmarks of her own making, and dusted the shelves. I doubt if the old fisherman

who sold me that place would have recognized it; he hadn't bothered with the niceties of modern life — such as soap, water, paint, or indoor plumbing — and twenty years' worth of storms hadn't been kind to it. She was an indifferent cook, at least; not even my conscience could have withstood the assault of any more good works in a single day.

The next day she rebuilt the kitchen table. Then she cleaned out Petra's tank; that project took her two days and the house smelled worse than the hold of the *Dancer*. But the water was clear and, as Petra said, "brisk." For a warrior, she knew a hell of a lot about housework.

Petra asked her about it one night, as Sparrow was teaching her how to sew. "This is what my life would be like," Sparrow had replied, "if I had stayed in the nest. By doing all the housework here, I not only repay your mother in a small way for allowing me to stay here, but I remind myself of home, and why I left it." She smiled. Petra looked horrified.

I walked to town the next night to try to sell her bands. She had been with us a week.

*** **

I'll call the town Xanadu, after a house I saw in an old movie. That wasn't the town's real name, but Charles Foster Kane's mansion was like my village in two respects: emotion and size. Xanadu was a false haven, a bitter haven for me; Xanadu was also about as big as one room in that monster of a house. Not as rich as the assistant scullery maid's room at Kane's, with all the power of a generator gone down, with all the running water of a stagnant pond — but Xanadu all the same. To carry the metaphor to the point of delight in my old professor's heart, I was Rosebud, and tonight my night in the fire.

The Darwinists met me at the state road, two miles from town, just over the hill from the house. There were five of them: a giant, three base norms, and a boy who shook with a palsy. The giant held me as a norm took my pistol. Large and ugly left fingerprints on my collarbone, but he didn't notice the bands I wore on my forearms, Flyer gold and silver covered by long sleeves and night. They dared me to run, to fight them. I didn't. They didn't go over the hill to the house.

They took me into Xanadu.

*** **

I saw him first. He wore white, embroidered white-on-white in a bar where the primary color was mud. His hair was white, too, whiter even than the white of his skin. He stood like a beacon, burning in the night, radiating his own light in the oil-lit darkness of Miguel's bar. Hot air greeted me inches inside the doorway, air fragrant with the odors of work, booze, and fear. Most of the adult population of Xanadu lined the walls, standing two and three deep — maybe thirty in all. They faded into the color of the walls, their invisibility long practiced.

The sharp tip of a quarrel pushed me forward, past twelve soldiers gathered at the poker table, past an amazing assortment of weapons resting on the old scarred wood. I heard the clunk as my pistol hit the pile. I cursed my stupidity — of now, twenty minutes



ago, and a week ago. I prayed that the other soldiers were not in my house, that Petra and Sparrow had had some time to get away, that they had at least died quickly.

I stood beside the white man at the bar. I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

He spoke without turning: "Even in this village, this remote village, the taint of corruption is strong. Mothers spend the pesos that they have saved from their childhood so their children will be huge, strong monsters that will eat them out of house and home with their inhuman appetites. The gene engineers grow rich and strong on the ignorance here, even here, in the superstitious belief that bigger is better, richer, stronger...."

He swung around to face me. His eyes were red. He held a glass of Miguel's rotgut with a hand that had no fingers. "It is my task to re-educate the people — here, everywhere, in all the little hell-holes in this misbegotten province. To show them the folly of their ways. To make an example of...." his eyes dropped down my body, then up to meet my eyes, "... certain altered specimens." He smiled with perfect teeth. "I am Captain Francis Saint Francis of the Darwinist Expeditionary Forces."

I stared at him, numb. I had no idea if he knew who I was. I had no idea what to do if he did know. "I'm Chris — Christine Bell. I fish off the coast."

He nodded. Slowly. "Miguel," he called. "A drink for Chris."

I looked to the man behind the bar, found the dark eyes that had nursed me through a few hangovers, found the strong shoulders that had been my support on more than a few lonely nights. Miguel Fierza, town barkeep, historian, librarian, dealer in precious metals and commodities, friend.

Miguel nodded, then moved slowly and carefully to pour a finger of whiskey — the good whiskey — into a shot glass. Bottles were smashed behind him; I could hear the crunch of glass under his feet. He nursed a swelling and rapidly discolored cheek with one hand as he poured water to the brim of my glass. *Take care*, his eyes said. I nodded. I usually take my whiskey straight; my first sip was limper than bath water. I wanted to down the whole thing in one gulp. Instead I sat the glass down on the bar again, its contents barely disturbed. My eyes roamed my neighbors. My skin was closer to the Darwinist shade than theirs, my build that of a giant's in comparison; I had lived here months instead of centuries. How much did they know about me? How much would they risk for me? Or did Saint Francis already know my true name?

I saw a plan and I leapt at it, too scared to examine it closely.

I pushed my sleeves back. Saint Francis' eyes went wide at the sight of Flyer gold. "Hey," I said. "Maybe you're just the man to buy these." I held my wrists up so everyone could see; I heard an explosion of exhaled breath, a sigh of lost tension... and a long, low whistle from the man beside me. He laid his left hand on my right wrist, encircling the band.

"Samurai bands," he said slowly. "From the

royal guard of the aerie, unless I miss my guess." His grip tightened. His good hand was strong. "Where did you get these?"

I heard chairs scrape back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his men rise, their hands reaching for their weapons. "Off — off a dead Flyer," I said. "I found her body washed up near my place. She'd been dead a few days. I came in tonight to see about selling these bands."

"To him?" Saint Francis cocked his head toward Miguel.

"Maybe. If the price was right."

"You underestimate their worth." He laughed. "In Nuevo Angeles these bands would buy your fortune — a husband, a house, a child of any species, sex, or color. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Chris?"

I shrugged.

"Of course, half the people in Nuevo Angeles would kill you and sell the bands themselves. Simple country girls don't have contacts in the big city, do they, Chris?"

I shrugged.

"But simple country girls don't have gene-engineered bodies, do they Chris? How big are you, six-three, six-four? Mass about two-twenty?"

"My parents — they —"

"Your parents, Chris?"

"They saved up and —"

"I'm sure they did, Mary."

I froze. Hands grabbed my shoulders — large hands, with calluses I could feel through my shirt. The giant, again.

"Mary? Mary Christobal Cochinka, isn't it? Your true name?"

I couldn't move. He stared up at me; thin nose, thin lips twisted in a smile, his skin dry and toughened, his eyebrows so pale as to be invisible above those red, red eyes.

"Yes," I said finally. "I am Mary Christobal Cochinka."

"I know." He nodded to the man behind me; my captor gathered my hands in his as Saint Francis turned to pace the floor.

"My friends —" Saint Francis started. "My friends, in difficult times, one must resort to extraordinary methods to bring justice to this world. I am sorry to require your presence here tonight. I had thought merely to question you about an escaped Flyer — the Flyer who wore those bands that Mary Christobal Cochinka wears so proudly now. We will return to the Flyer later, but now my duty as a citizen requires me to inform you about the great criminal who dwells among you. Her name is not Christine Bell. She is what I called her before: Mary Christobal Cochinka, whore-mother to half the Fisher race!"

"No!" I yelled. "I —" The giant slipped his left arm around my throat, squeezing my breath to a stop. I gagged, pain rising up my throat like sour vomit. I tried to claw his arm with my left hand. He wrenched my right wrist high up my back, stopping only when my yelp struggled past his forearm. I didn't dare move, could barely breathe.

Saint Francis glared at me from the center of the

room. Behind him loomed the faces of my neighbors, dark, silent, judgmental. "Mary Christobal Cochinka," Saint Francis said slowly. "Daughter and heir of Christobal Electronics, formerly Christobal Fisheries — admitted conspirators with the sub-human race known as the Fishers! When operating as Christobal Fisheries, they were judged guilty of adding gene-altering chemicals to their canned products! Righteous citizens attacked and burned their cannery, forcing them out of business!"

I couldn't say anything — couldn't call him liar, murderer.

"Now her family produces electronic devices for the Fishers — the so-called bone phone that mimics human speech for those monsters, leading the gullible into pouring millions of dollars into undersea applications, not realizing that they rob human workers of jobs and give great economic power into those finny hands! For this, she is an enemy of the human race! For the bone phone itself she deserves to die! But her true crime is worse, far worse." He paused and lowered his voice. "She consorted with one of them. She lay with a Fisher in the sand and she bore his child!" The last three words were a scream as he bore down on me. "How was it, Mary? How did it feel, Mary? Was it cold? Did it have scales?" He was inches from my face, his spittle hitting me as he shouted. "Were you on top, Mary? Or was he? Did you have an orgasm, Mary? Did you have an orgasm when he died, Mary? Died gasping for air in your arms, his lungs seared by air he was never meant to breathe? Did you like it, Mary? Did you?"

I kicked out at him — kicked at his vicious lies and half-truths. One boot glanced off his hip. The other found the pit of his stomach. He doubled over with an "oufff" of expelled air.

Then I was in mid-air — then face down on Miguel's rough concrete floor, a heavy weight astride my hips, my ribs aching only slightly more than the rest of me.

"Hold her this time, you fool!" Saint Francis barked. Vaguely, I felt my wrists being crossed and pinned.

Miguel's voice rumbled into my consciousness: "Enough," he said. "Let her be."

"This woman is a great criminal! If I had it in my power, she would be punished for her crimes! Executed!"

I couldn't see where Saint Francis was — I couldn't see anything except the floor and about two inches of base board directly in front of me.

"You have told stories," Miguel answered. "We see no proof."

"You mistake me, Senor," Saint Francis continued in a softer voice. "We did not come here for her. She is beyond our jurisdiction. I felt, however, that the good citizens of this town deserved to know who lurked in their midst." He paused. "We came looking for a rogue Flyer."

Miguel snorted.

"This Flyer is our true quarry. She is mad. She escaped from the aerie while deranged. As a trained killer in their army, she is dangerous to all humans in

this area. We must kill her before she kills us." Silence met his words. He continued. "It was my civic duty to warn you of this criminal. We have no intention of harming Mary. We acted only in self-defense. You saw her attack me!"

"We trade with the Angels, Captain," a voice came. I closed my eyes. "They buy our fish and crops." A moment passed before I was able to identify the speaker as Jason, the mayor. I didn't know he was so brave.

"I see," Saint Francis said icily. "Then we will question Mary, as it is obvious she knows where the Flyer is, and then we will be gone. I only pray that you and your children are not slaughtered in your beds by this mad Angel from Hell." Silence met his last statement. "Let her up."

The weight removed itself from me. I opened my eyes, groaned. A hand rolled me over on my back. Miguel and the giant stood above me, glaring at each other. The Darwinist stepped back. Miguel reached down, grabbed my left hand and pulled me to my feet. I wavered; he held me upright and steered me to a seat. He left me there, again taking refuge behind the bar. Sitting down hurt my ribs; leaning back in the chair made breathing easier. I winced as the giant clapped a hand on my shoulder. I touched my face. My hand came back dotted with blood and grit. Miguel's floor was rough.

"How long have you been hiding the Flyer?" Saint Francis barked.

"I found her body three days ago," I said softly. "She washed up on my beach. Somebody had shot her. I kept the bands and threw the body back to the sea."

"I don't believe you," Saint Francis said flatly. "Whoever killed her would have taken the bands. And I don't think that you killed her. I think she's at your house. Alive."

I looked up quickly, and I know those red eyes saw the fear in my face. He smiled. "You all will have to stay here tonight. For your own safety, of course. We don't know what allies she and the Angel have out there." He dipped into a pants pocket and threw silver coins on the bar. "The door will be locked from the outside. We will free you when it is safe. However," he smiled at me, "drinks are on the house."

I heard them leave. I heard the doors lock. I heard the men and women around me finally begin to move, finally begin to talk. I stayed in my chair, my head to my knees, my blood slowly clotting. After a while someone brought me a drink. After a while they brought me a bottle.

In the bright morning light I staggered out on the state road. I tried not to think. I tried not to feel. But I found what I knew I would.

My house was embers, my boat sunk. Of Petra and Sparrow there was no sign.

I walked through the ashes of my home. Two chains and brackets marked the porch swing. Petra's room glittered with shattered glass. All that remained of my bed was the melted plastic of the mattress, a

(Continued to page 56)

True Magic

By Robert A. Metzger

Art By Larry Blamire

Rasputin looked like hell. I bent closer, peering through the thick, green-tinted glass. His eyes were glazed, and his normally moist skin was dried and cracked. Dead flies lay strewn around him.

"What's wrong with Rasputin?" I asked.

"He refuses to rewire his neural network," said a raspy voice behind me.

I closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. The old woman was slipping fast. Breathing out slowly through my mouth, I then reopened my eyes. Control was the key. If I could hold on for just a few more minutes my escape would be complete.

Rasputin plodded slowly forward, then fell into his empty water bowl.

"He needs food," I said, while still looking at the Samoan Tree Toad. Rasputin flicked out his long pink tongue, ineffectively smacking the wall of the terrarium.

"There's more than enough food if he's willing to see it," replied Professor Thelma Beyers.

I shook my head ever so slightly.

Rasputin was one dead toad. He was wart deep in dead flies, but was starving because his brain couldn't understand the concept of a fly that wasn't buzzing about. Rasputin was the victim of his own limited neural hardwiring as well as the insane theories of an old woman who should have been retired a decade ago. But the powers that be couldn't retire Professor Thelma Beyers. The bureaucrats and bean counters who ran the university would have no qualms about trying to oust a woman who held the Amerson Chair in Psycho-Anthropology, but they would never touch someone who had lunch with the University Chancellor the second Tuesday of every month. In the world of university politics, it was much better to let a few toads starve, and a few desperate students jump out of windows, than to try and force the retirement of someone who broke bread with the big boss.

"Better you than me," I whispered to Rasputin. This was graduate school, and only the fit survived.

"What did you say, Kid?" she asked.

I smiled. That would be the last time that I'd have to hear the old bitch call me Kid. When she signed off on my thesis I would become Dr. William Benford, and I'd be halfway down the hallway before her office door could even slam shut. I turned away from Rasputin.

"I said, have you signed my thesis?" Hell, I would have kissed the old woman if I thought it would

have speeded up the process of getting my thesis signed. She had burned all self-respect out of me years ago.

She reached forward one liver-spotted, leathery hand, and rested it gently on my thesis. Except for my thesis and her bony hand, the only other thing on her massive walnut desk was a lopsided and cracked skull. There was not a family picture, a vase of wilting flowers, or even a dog-eared desk calendar to give some sense of humanness to her office. Thelma Beyers could only be comfortable with the smashed-in skull of a New Guinea headhunter as a desk decoration.

Thelma grinned wide, and her old skin stretched tightly across her own skull. Her pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle.

Something gnawed in my gut. I swallowed a burp, and tasted the pizza from last night's dinner. This was going to be bad.

"It's bat guano," she said simply and without emotion. Poking at my thesis with a bony finger, she slowly slid it across her desk until it teetered at the edge. "Pure bat guano," she added. With a final push, my thesis fell from her desk, and dropped into a brass wastebasket.

My brain screamed for action.

She had just thrown away three years of my life. This would be the old bitch's last insult. A plan crystallized in my head. It was both simple and just. I'd bash in her head with the old skull, then stuff her body into Rasputin's terrarium. It would be weeks before anybody would even notice the difference.

"Do it!" roared a voice in my head.

My body stood rooted to the floor.

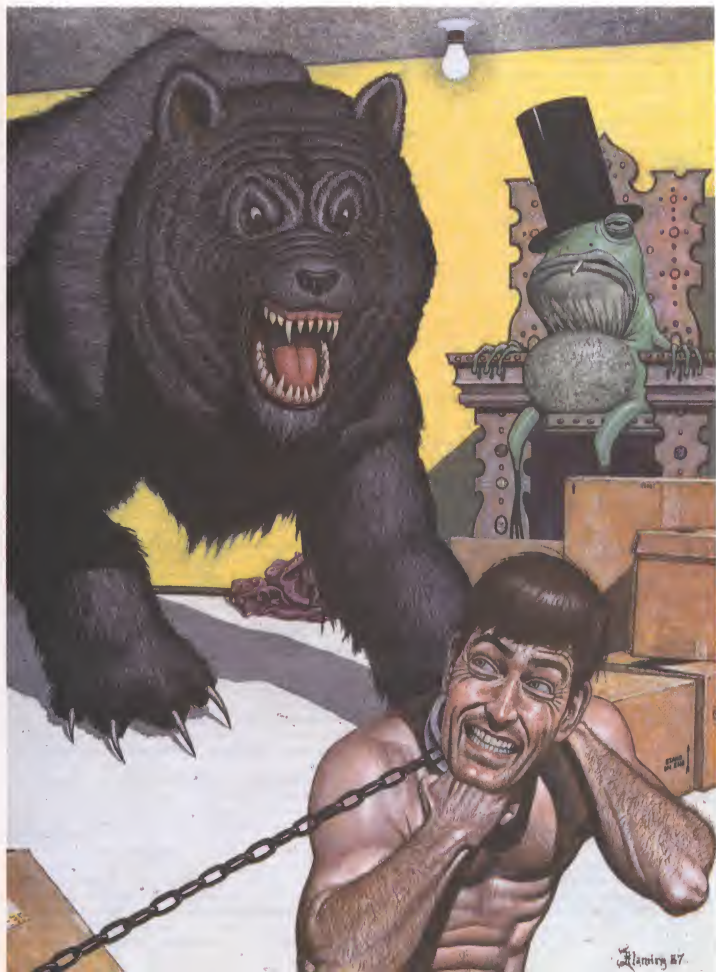
Somehow, the slave-master reflex that had been forged from so many years of graduate student submission held me back.

"A solution may exist for the dilemma we find ourselves in," said Thelma. She slowly stroked the skull affectionately, then ran a hand across her own chalkdust-streaked gray hair.

I found myself breathing, not even realizing I had been holding my breath.

"Give me one week of your time, and then I'll sign it." She glanced toward the wastebasket and turned up her nose.

I gritted my teeth. My work was outstanding. I had not only proved the existence of a racial memory in mammals, I had actually pinpointed its location in



the brain. I had fractionated more rat cerebellum than any other grad student on the West Coast in my quest for racial memories. I'd clutch at any straw, and she damn well knew it.

"It's a promise," she added. Her wide smile revealed dark-stained teeth.

The old woman might have been a crazy old bitch, but her word was good. She had never lied to me.

"Deal," I said simply and without any hesitation. I could do anything for a week if it would get me out of here.

"Sit down, Kid," she said, and nodded towards the table in front of her chalkboard.

"The name is William," I said defiantly.

Her eyes grew wide, and the muscles at the base of her jaw quivered. "Sit, Kid," she said slowly and evenly.

I sat.

Reaching into the top of her turtleneck sweater, she pulled out a silver chain. A key dangled from it.

"I need your aid in an experiment I'm carrying out in my private lab." She caressed the key.

I suddenly realized that a week could be a very long time.

She stood slowly, and I could hear her bones creak. Walking slowly around the desk, she approached the chalkboard. Her long, braided ponytail bopped against her withered old ass.

Picking up a stub of chalk, she scrawled something across the board. In a final underlining flurry, the chalk splintered, sending fragments across the floor.

I groaned, doing nothing to hide my feelings. Things bubbled deep in my gut. I had known what she was going to write before she had even picked up the chalk.

"True Magic!" she said as she read from the chalkboard. Holding her index finger and thumb up to her eye, she squinted through the narrow gap between them. "I'm this close to understanding the physics of true magic and demonstrating a magical act in a controlled lab environment."

Throughout Thelma's long career, she had done outstanding work relating brain structure and chemistry to the social workings of peoples, but she always seemed to drift back to what she liked to call *true magic*. Her obsession was not with the magic of pulling the Queen of Hearts out of a deck of cards, or transforming a cane into a bundle of flowers, but in true magic, where people levitate themselves and elephants actually disappear.

"Rasputin's a perfect example," she said. "Imagine if he, amongst all his toad acquaintances, had the unique neural wiring to enable him to see a fly that was stationary."

I had never considered that Samoan Tree Toads actually had acquaintances.

"At a gathering, Rasputin would spot a fly quietly sitting on a rock," she said. "No other toads could see that fly. Rasputin would then perform the ultimate act of Toad Magic. At his command, a fly would appear from the thin air. By merely flicking his tongue in the fly's direction, the startled insect would buzz into the air, thereby appearing to the other toads. That would

be true magic to the average toad."

I glanced over at Rasputin. He sat motionlessly, huddled in the corner of his terrarium.

"What's true for toads, is also true for humans," said Thelma.

Fantastic, I thought. I could be the hit of the next beer bash if I had the ability to summon flies from nowhere. The old woman was gone.

"There are those humans whose neural hardwiring is slightly different, whose perspective allows them to see things that others can't. These are the ones who with the proper *stimulation* could recognize their abilities and perform true magic."

I had little doubt that Thelma saw lots of things that other people couldn't.

"You will assist me in both proving and demonstrating that a special type of human mind, under the proper stimulation, is capable of true acts of magic," she said.

I'd put up with her for almost five years. Another week of taking notes while watching Thelma try to levitate tennis balls as she sat in a bucket of ice cubes wasn't going to kill me.

A racket in the terrarium caught both our attentions. Rasputin hopped from wall to wall, his suction-cup toes grabbing glass, until finally, from sheer exhaustion, he slid from the wall and landed belly up. His crash caused a single dead fly to ricochet upward. Rasputin's brain must have clicked into automatic, and locked onto the arcing fly, because his tongue darted, and he sucked down what must have been his first meal in a week.

I had never before heard Thelma laugh. Her cackle bordered on the insane. "Take a lesson from Rasputin!" she yelled as she pointed a withered finger at me.

My stomach had suddenly tied itself into a knot.

Constructed of a massive slab of steel, and crisscrossed with bolt heads the size of half dollars, the multi-ton door eased slowly open as Thelma tugged at it.

"When this was the physics building they built their cyclotron in here." She rapped her bony knuckles against the foot-thick door, then dropped her key back beneath her sweater. With the door cracked open, Thelma reached inside and flipped on a light. An air conditioner whirled on.

Before entering, she turned, then stared at me. Through her almost translucent skin the veins in her forehead pulsed quickly. "You'll give me one week," she said.

I nodded slowly. At that moment, it occurred to me that there was only one thing more insane than professors, and that had to be their crazy students.

Thelma slipped into the room.

I followed.

Powerful springs slowly closed the door.

The room was large, but claustrophobic. I was only a hair over six feet tall, but the ceiling seemed to hover less than a foot above my head. Naked bulbs cast hard shadows throughout the nearly empty room, and not a single window cut the surface of any of the three visible walls. A dark curtain was pulled across

the far wall. This was the perfect retreat for Thelma. The room felt dead and sterile.

I still stood by the entrance, but Thelma had walked to the center of the room and stood in the middle of a circular slab of concrete that was raised nearly a foot above the floor.

"Evidence of true magic exists all around us," announced Thelma. She squinted in the harsh light, and I could imagine that she stared out at a phantom audience. Gradually, her eyes focused on me.

"Each day, as the insanity of this world grows, and as we move ever closer to global destruction, the stress and strain pushes our brains ever closer to see things that are unseen, and interact with dimensions and forces that ancient man could have never comprehended. With the correct stimulation, we could push ourselves into a world where true magic exists."

The room was warm, and the air circulated slowly, but I found myself shivering. Thelma's theories had often been half-baked, and I had called her an insane old bitch countless times, but this was the first time that she had actually frightened me. The old woman was flat-out nuts.

"Evidence!" she screamed. She pointed a bony finger into the air, then scuttled off the concrete platform and moved toward the curtain. Grabbing a handful of fabric, she tugged the curtain open.

I was drawn closer. It was like slowing down to see a wreck on the freeway. At first you caught only a glimpse and realized that you shouldn't look any closer, but you soon found yourself tapping the brake to slow down and straining to see the twisted wreckage and broken bodies.

I found myself stepping off the concrete platform without having remembered even crossing the room.

I faced a wall covered with keys.

"Keys?" I asked in unbelieving tones. Thousands of them dangled from small hooks that were sunk into the wall.

"Of course," she said. She smiled and her left eyelid twitched. "It's the perfect example of true magic in our modern world."

I had no idea what she was talking about, and the expression on my face must have shown it.

"Did your keys ever seem to misplace themselves?" she asked.

"Keys are always getting away," I answered. "They're easy to lose."

She shook her head slowly. "They don't get misplaced," she said. "The power of our own subconscious pushes them into a world we can't see. It is evidence of true magic."

I found myself looking over my shoulder at the massive door. The dean couldn't overlook a professor who spent all her spare time staring at a wall of keys, trying to will them to vanish. They'd get a nice padded room for her, and assign me to some slightly less unbalanced professor.

"The trunk keys to Volvos and Saabs seem most susceptible to this phenomenon," she said with a look of deadly seriousness.

I didn't even nod. I didn't want to startle her by making any abrupt moves.

"A further example is illustrated here," she said as she swept her hand over three small dollhouses set up on a card table. She lifted the roof off the nearest, setting it on the floor, then reached into the house, and lifted out a small stuffed toy.

"This is merely a simulation of the real thing, you realize," she said.

"Of course," I replied. To disagree with her while she was caught up in the depths of her fantasy might result in a total mental breakdown.

"Ever notice how when you put the cat outside, it seems to get back in, even though all the doors are shut and the windows locked?" She tugged on the whiskers of the toy cat. "I left this cat outside its house last night, and now we find it back inside. Solid evidence of true magic," she said.

This was becoming more frightening by the minute. I had never before watched someone become mentally unraveled.

"I've saved the most conclusive proof for last," she said.

I knew where her insane vision was taking her. When I saw the clothes dryer, I didn't have the slightest doubt.

"I see you are starting to understand," she said, having incorrectly interpreted the look on my face. Opening the lid of the clothes dryer, she pulled out a handful of socks. "The plaids are almost twice as likely to vanish as the solids," she said.

In a matter of moments I had gone from feelings of total contempt to those of embarrassment and fright, and then finally to pity. Her mind had turned to tapioca.

"Any questions before we begin?" she asked.

I had to figure out some way to get her out of this room and upstairs to where I could get some help. "Do you want to get something to eat before we begin?" I asked.

"No food for you," she said sweetly. She smiled, and for an instant she reminded me of my grandmother.

"Why?" I asked gently.

"Because the experiment has begun," she answered. Reaching further into the dryer, she pulled something out. She pointed it at my chest.

"Remove all your clothes, and get the chain out from beneath the dollhouses."

She cocked the pistol.

I blinked once, but the gun was still clenched in her bony fist.

Bang!

Hot air fanned my left ear. The bullet slammed into the far wall, and the metallic echo filled the soundtight room.

"Bring the chain," she said. The gun was once again aimed at my chest.

I brought the chain.

The concrete slab chilled my bare ass, and the Teflon collar around my throat chafed at my neck. The fast thump of my heart pounded in my ears. A thick link chain ran from my collar to a bolt sunk into the concrete platform.

"Two things are required for true magic to take place," said Thelma. She carelessly waved the gun in my direction.

I tensed, waiting for a bullet to rip through my chest.

"Care to venture a guess?" she asked. She smiled and lowered the pistol.

I didn't move.

"First," she said, "is a subject whose neural hardwiring is skewed from the norm. A subject is needed who has demonstrated the ability to draw on and use information that most people can't quite see." Again she pointed the gun at me.

I shook my head. "Not me," I squeaked.

"Kid," she said laughingly, "for five years I've studied you. I've given you problem after problem to solve, always making sure that you never had quite enough facts to draw any valid conclusions. Yet, you always saw some correlation in what appeared to be meaningless facts, and were able to draw startling conclusions that were always validated later when I gave you the complete set of data. You knew things that couldn't be known."

"I just have a gut feel about things," I offered feebly. My gut gumbled at me as if to back up my story.

"Don't sell yourself short, Kid," she said. "Your mental makeup is the most atypical I've ever encountered."

Despite the situation, and the fact that I was staring down a gun barrel, I laughed nervously. *She* was the queen of the atypical mental makeups.

"The second thing you need," she said as she ignored my laughter, "is stimulation."

She waved the gun around the room. "I have provided that."

I could hear the pride in her voice.

"The rules are simple," she said. "You are attached to the floor by a length of ten-foot chain. You have no food or water. Only with an act of true magic can you save yourself."

She turned and started for the door, then stopped and looked back. "I'm not trying to be cruel," she said. "You'll find a small opening in the floor that was once used as a drain. It's against university policy to not include proper sanitation facilities during this type of experiment."

I had reached the snapping point. It would be better to be shot now than to die of thirst days later. "You're a crazy, lying old bitch!" I screamed.

"I have not lied," she said calmly. "In a week's time I will sign your thesis. If you're not alive to submit it to the graduate office, that is through no fault of mine."

Reaching the door, she pulled the silver chain from around her neck and unlocked the inside of the door. "I'm very reasonable. I'm going to leave the key by the door so you can get out once you have removed your neck collar. Two acts of true magic in one week would be too much to expect." She dropped the chain and key to the floor.

Pulling the door open a crack, she squeezed her way out. The door slowly shut.

I tugged on the collar around my throat for just an instant, then rattled the thick chain.

Rasputin had been her first victim, and now I was her second. I had just been killed by my thesis adviser.

My mouth was already dry.

"Willy," said a voice.

With my eyes still shut, I moved slowly. My chain rattled.

"You're dying," said the voice.

I opened my gritty eyes. A blurred lightbulb hung over my head. I couldn't swallow past my swollen tongue.

"Time's running out," said the voice.

Turning slowly on my side, the room swiveled around me.

"Are you ready to do it?" asked the voice.

I blinked. My left eye remained glued shut.

"Can you see me now?" asked the voice.

The back of my eyeball itched as I focused. Rasputin was back.

"Leave me alone," I whispered through my cracked lips. The toad would give me no rest. The first time he had come, he had simply sat there, flicking his tongue, and rolling his eyes. The second time he had shown up, he wore a small top hat cocked over his left eye. The third time he came he wanted to talk about baseball.

The little bastard was a Mets fan. I pissed on him and he vanished.

The last time he had appeared, he wore a monocle and kept rambling about extra dimensions and knowledge gained through racial memories. He only left after I had made comments about his mother and her relationship with an Australian Stench Toad.

This time he wore a red velvet coat adorned with two big brass buttons. He sat on a jewel-encrusted throne. A cigarette dangled from his lips.

"If you don't do it this time, you won't get another chance," said the toad. He flicked ashes onto the cement floor.

I hated toads that smoked.

"Good," I hissed at him.

Slowly sitting up, I felt something in my ears pop, and a few bars of the "Star Spangled Banner" drifted through my head. Rasputin was still lounging in his throne.

"Let's be rational about this," said Rasputin. "We both know that I'm just a figment of your dehydrated and dying brain, but that's no reason to ignore me. You don't want to hurt my feelings, do you?"

I wished I could have spit on him.

"You can get out of that collar if you want to," said Rasputin.

I slowly lifted my hands to the collar. Dried blood flaked from my fingertips. "I can't break it," I said.

Rasputin sighed. "Why does everything have to be so damn difficult for you? You don't have to break it, you just have to slip it through your neck."

"There's no such thing as magic!" I yelled at the

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BOOKS

By Darrell Schweitzer

Objectivity

Notion of the month: There is no such thing as an objective book review. This relates to the idea of books vs. careers discussed last issue. We, who are reasonably devoted and knowledgeable science fiction readers, approach any new book with an awareness of the *author*, his career, where the present work stands in the body of his work, and even to some extent what sort of person he (or she) is. We have *expectations*. A few critical theorists to the contrary, there is no such thing as just studying the *text*.

Even if it's a cuneiform scripture from ancient Sumer, we bring to it some preconceptions of what we expect to find in ancient scriptures. At least we are aware that we are reading a work produced by a culture other than our own. The *experience* of reading it is different. And, while we may not know much about Shakespeare the man, it is virtually impossible to read one of his plays without some awareness that the work in question is (1) classic, (2) Elizabethan, and (3) British. Text does not exist in a vacuum.

With living authors our expectations lead us sometimes to expect more, or less, demand more, or forgive, depending on who the author is. If you've never heard of the author at all, that evokes a separate reaction: This is a book by an unknown. Be on

your guard. Don't expect too much.

This reaction translates into sales in a lot of ways, some of them contradictory. Most readers simply don't buy unknown authors. But when we do read them — let's be candid, folks — we start with a slightly patronizing attitude of, "Well let's see if this guy knows his stuff." If he does, it becomes a delighted discovering. We've found a new author. What may have started as reluctance can lead to exaggerated accolades. The new guy can seemingly do a lot on *his first try*, and, besides, it's nice to show that we're above literary provincialism, isn't it?

I can't help but wonder: Would *Riddley Walker* or *The Handmaid's Tale* have received quite the attention they have inside the *science fiction* field if they'd been written by, say, Robert Sheckley and Pamela Sargent?

Now let's look at a book that is written *entirely* for our preconceived expectations:

To Sail Beyond the Sunset
By Robert A. Heinlein
Ace/Putnam, 1987
416 pp., \$18.95

Here's a novel that could not have been published if written by someone less famous than Heinlein. It's not *bad*, in the sense that such disasters as *I Will Fear No Evil* would not pass the John Doe Test (i.e., if John Doe rather than Robert Heinlein had written it, no one would have suspected it of being of publishable quality). The problem, if it can correctly be called a problem, is that it is

totally self-referential to Heinlein's other work. It exists, like decadent late Latin poetry, purely to make the reader recall the classics.

Heinlein is giving us the life story of Maureen Johnson, Lazarus Long's mother, whose cross-temporal and incestuous relations with her son were told in stupefying detail in *Time Enough for Love*.

I am happy to report that *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* is a far more readable book than *Time Enough for Love*. It's unlikely to be the subject of "How Far Did You Get?" parlor games. The only parts that could be called stupefying are the sex scenes. I call them *sex scenes* very deliberately, because Heinlein seems wholly incapable of *eroticism*. But his characters can talk about sex, its theory, practice, mechanics, morality, legality, etc., in pillow-dialogues of stunning banality.

Happily, these don't take up most of the book. Happily, too, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* doesn't share another fault with *Time Enough for Love*. That novel could have been at least five percent shorter if some courageous editor had simply chopped out the words "Dear" and "Darling" every time they occurred in the text. This time, somebody has. I hope it was Heinlein, learning better. In any case, the writing is far less cute.

The virtues of this book are not science-fictional ones. It is at its best as a fictional autobiography of a bright girl growing up in the American Midwest around the turn of the century, and as a polemic. It is at



RATING SYSTEM

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

its weakest in the rather silly science-fictional framework that causes Maureen to write all this.

The silly business of the book is a clumsy attempt to string all Heinlein's fiction together. Isaac Asimov has been doing this too, of late. It is a common thing for writers to do after they've been writing for a while. (Recall James Branch Cabell's heroic/absurd attempt to jam *everything* he'd written up to a point, poetry, novels, essays and all, into *The Biography of the Life of Manuel*.) But where Asimov has been doing it rather deftly, linking his robot and Foundation series, Heinlein resorts to the most outrageous jerry-rigging. In *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* Maureen has something to do with the first flight to the Moon — as related in "The Man Who Sold the Moon."

But it didn't happen that way, right? Heinlein should have taken a lesson from Poul Anderson, who quietly dropped some of the obsolete future history he based his earlier stories on. Instead, much of the dramatic (and even ideological) edge of *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* is blunted when we realize that this is all taking place in an alternate time-track. It's all made up, see, including Heinlein's diagnosis for what is wrong with our (real, contemporary) society.

This is unfortunate because the serious business of the book is Heinlein, once again, telling his readers *how to live*. *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* is a tract, but hardly a frivolous one. Heinlein means it. Some people may find his beliefs repugnant — indeed, it's obvious that many do, especially in Europe — but they are his beliefs, and they do represent *one* approach to existence.

The Unforgivable Sin, says Heinlein, is taking *anything* on authority. But, if we can take Heinlein as an authority for a moment, we can dismiss all religion as nonsense, theology being "a discussion without a subject." Sexual mores are a matter of individual responsibility, and beyond that, not getting caught. His characters always pay lip service to social and religious norms but, privately at least,

regard themselves to be the sole arbiters of what is right and wrong. (By way of religious norms, we might remark that Heinlein characters are utterly untouched by the Christian values of compassion and charity. They have no time for the weak, for "losers," and don't expect anyone to have time for *them* if they fail to measure up. Heinlein's detractors would call them smug sociopaths.)

The politics of Heinlein characters (in this case that most rugged of all groups of individualists, the Howard Families) remain a curious mix of patriotic jingoism and individual-above-the-law. Maureen Johnson thinks it is everyone's essential duty to



serve in all the country's wars, and gets livid at those pinko-liberal revisionists who suggest that the United States has ever been in the wrong about, say, the Spanish-American War. (This is plausible for a woman growing up in the 1880s, who lived through it, but is it also Heinlein's view? Does he know that the view he opposes is now *orthodox* among historians, and that blaming it all on the evil Spaniards is a bizarre eccentricity? Maybe so. Further evidence of social decay, he would doubtless grumble.)

So: If this were written by John Doe, we would dismiss it as a windy bore. If it were published at all, it would be in a tiny edition from a marginal publisher and

vanish without a trace. But because it is by Heinlein, because it follows Maureen Johnson through the Future History, because it embodies Heinlein's thoughts, it is a bestseller.

There are millions of readers still interested in what goes on inside the century's great science-fictional minds. For that, they will forgive much.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Weaveworld

By Clive Barker
Poseidon Press, 1987
789 pp. in uncorrected proof,
\$19.95

Here's another one science fiction readers are going to have expectations about. So is the general public, for that matter, and the book should make bestseller lists, but I bet a lot of hardcore science fiction fans skip it. Why? Because science fiction readers hate *horror*. This has been evident ever since Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" was printed in *Amazing* in 1927. The Lovecraft story may have been vastly more literate than anything else in the magazine at that time, but readers found it, well, *yucky*.

And Clive Barker's work has been a whole lot yuckier. He is the established master of splatter-prose. I wish I could remember who it was that summed him up best: "Like *Zombies of Blood Island* as written by Graham Greene." After *The Books of Blood* and Barker's utterly unprecedented early success, I am sure a lot of readers, both pro and con, have made up their minds about him.

Well, then, *Weaveworld* will surprise you and, according to the Schweitzerian Uncertainty (or Non-Objectivity) Principle, the response to the book, maybe even the reader's experience reading it, will be exaggerated because it is by Barker.

If it had been by John Doe, I think it would have been greeted with fanfare and trumpets. But it's by Barker, and that's *news*.

Weaveworld is not a horror novel, but epic fantasy, and not a

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What Brothers Are For

By Patricia Anthony

Art By Byron Taylor

Pa had whupped Daniel three times that day: once for fidgeting in the morning service, once for leaving his chores half done, and the last time, the worst time, for laughing and saying that the other whuppings hadn't hurt.

Zeke followed his brother as he ran from the house. By the time he caught up to him, Daniel had stopped pretending the whupping didn't matter and was crying for real. Snot ran from his nose, leaving a trail of slime from one nostril to his lips.

Daniel's crying made Zeke feel funny. The welts on his brother's legs looked like they hurt. "Hey. Wanna see a neat rock?" Zeke asked, pulling the stone from his pocket.

Daniel took the rock and held it in a slimy fist. "It's got funny pictures all over it. Where'd you get it?"

"Place I know," he said vaguely. Daniel's tears had dried, and Zeke's pity had dried up with them. "Now give it back. Come on, Daniel. Give it back. I'll pound on you worse than Pa done. I'll set you on fire and fan you."

"Lemme go. I'll tell Pa," Daniel said.

Zeke released him instantly. "No!" he said so all-of-a-sudden that a sneaky look came to the younger boy's face.

"So. Where'd you get it?"

Zeke stared longingly at the rock in Daniel's fist. "Come on. Give it back. It ain't so neat. There's lots of neater things where that come from. They got arrowheads and bows. Junk like that." He felt betrayed, but he thought that's what he deserved for trusting his brother.

The snot on Daniel's lip was a crisp film. He was clutching the rock as if he meant business. "I wanna go."

"Nuh uh. It's too dangerous. What if we get stuck out and the sun goes down, huh? What about that?"

His little brother scuffed a foot in the dirt. "You're always afraid of the dark. Just like Pa. Just like Ma. Shuttering up the windows at night and listening for things."

"Yeah?" Zeke asked with older-brother derision. "And just how you expect to hear them demon ghosts when they come, huh? Gotta have the fire built up and the shotgun ready."

"There ain't no ghosts."

"Sure there ain't," Zeke sneered. "Sure. Guess it

was a lion or something et Downy Phoebees and all them others."

"I'll tell Pa if you don't take me," Daniel said again. "I'll show him the rock."

"Shoot," Zeke said under his breath. "All right, but we gotta hurry. And gimme the rock back, first."

"Naw. Think I'll keep it till you take me to that place."

Without another word, Zeke pushed off with stiff, angry legs across the grass.

It was a loud, blue day. Red squirrels chattered in the tender leaves of a young maple. The boys walked fast, Zeke slapping at branches and rocks with a stick he'd picked up.

"I could of told Pa more things about you, you know? I could of done more than showed him that rock," Daniel said, picking his way around the thick pines and the spindly trunks of the hardwoods.

"What things?" Zeke asked a little uneasily. There were all sorts of sins to worry about: little sins that got you a mean look and big sins that got you a whupping. Some of the sins, Zeke knew, would push your soul right over the edge, right where God couldn't catch you anymore, and you'd fall a long way into a lake of fire.

His brother's face had screwed itself into a grown-up frown, the expression of a deacon who'd just come across a real meaty sin. "Like talking with that space captain."

Zeke froze. That sin was serious. A whupping-with-a-belt kind of sin, if Pa found out.

There was an ugly smile on Daniel's face. "Pa'd have a calf if he knowed you talked to a heathern. They'd talk about you in service. Might even turn you out like he did Barney Potts so's them demon ghosts of yours could eat you."

"That space captain weren't no heathern," Zeke said calmly, even though the idea of being turned out disturbed him. Barney Potts had screamed when they'd closed and locked the door on him. Daniel had never heard a grown man cry before he'd heard the sounds that came from Barney.

To make the floppy feeling in his stomach go away, Zeke threw his arms over Daniel's shoulders and toppled him to the soft earth. His fingers found the ticklish places at Daniel's ribs. Daniel laughed until his face got tomato red and tears started up in his eyes. Then he started to hit back. A wild fist, no bigger



than a late season apple, hit Zeke on the side of his neck.

Startled, Zeke rolled off his brother. "Why'd you hit me so hard?" he asked.

Daniel wiped the tears from his eyes and sat up, his back hunched, his gaze averted. "Made me piss myself," Daniel said quietly. "I pissed myself all over."

Zeke rolled over on his back and hooted into the black-green pines. A banded blue jay flew out of a branch like a bullet of gray mist, leaving the branch twitching behind it.

"I guess you won't tell Pa about the space captain now. I could let everybody at school know about you peeing down your leg," he said, even though his brother wetting his pants wasn't anything Zeke would have told to anybody except God. He'd have to declare it to God because Zeke figured that somehow, someway, he'd come close to one of those little bitty sins. The little bitty sins counted up, and if you lived long enough, they'd get you. God'd drop down out of the air like a hawk and take your soul someplace so bad you'd wish you'd never been born.

Daniel clambered to his feet as his brother wat-

ched. Zeke was, without even wanting to be, somber and sympathetic. "Ain't like you pissed yourself bad, Daniel. It'll all be dry by the time we get there."

In fact, the spot of damp on the front of Daniel's pants had dried and stiffened well before they reached even the edges of the old forest.

"Didn't tell me we'd have to go in here," Daniel said, hanging back from the blue vines and the dank, dark cellar smell.

"You don't have to come, if you don't want to." Zeke picked a vine out of his way and walked in. The silent forest closed at his back. A few seconds later he heard the snap of a twig behind him and knew that Daniel had followed.

In the fetid air Zeke could hear the labored, snotty sound of Daniel's breathing. "What'd you and that space captain talk about?" Daniel asked.

"Just things. Neat things. They got more stuff on other planets, you know," his brother said sarcastically. "Like plows that go by themselves without anyone moving them. Things like that."

"I ain't stupid," Daniel retorted, his own sarcasm sounding childish. "I know. The kids talk."

"Uh huh."

"Bet they have chickens that don't need to be fed and water that walks its way into the house and trash that takes itself out and burns itself up, too."

"How did you know that?" Zeke asked. "Don't none of the grown-ups talk about that."

Daniel came up alongside his brother. He shrugged as they walked. "Everybody knows. Why don't Pa get one of them plows?"

"Cause them plows is heathern. And them self-feeding chickens and walking water is, too."

"You believe that?" Daniel asked, a little too directly to be comfortable for Zeke.

Zeke shrugged. "We come here in a space ship and stuff. Don't know how they took to that real good. I mean, if the other stuff is heathern, why wasn't the space ship heathern, too?"

"We did?" Daniel stopped in the middle of the trail and stared wide-eyed at his brother. "We come here in a space ship?"

"Not you, stupid. But our Ma and Pa done. They come here from Earth when they was young."

There was a look on Daniel's face like had been on it the time Zeke had told him there wasn't really a Santa Claus. "Thought this was the Earth," Daniel said.

"No, dummy. We're a colony," he said, drawing out the syllables the way the space captain had done.

"There's lots of colonies." He looked up at the place where the blue sky should have been. Triangular red leaves looked down. "All up there," Zeke gestured. "The captain told me. Said as how there were hundreds and hundreds of them things, all up in the stars."

"We there yet?" Daniel wanted to know.

"Almost," Zeke answered, disappointed and a little irritated that Daniel didn't think what the captain told him was the most wonderful thing he'd ever heard.

Without warning they stepped out of the

overgrowth. Sunlight hit them like a blow. Between charcoal stumps of trees the stench of old smoke lay like a fog.

Picking his way across the ashes, Zeke headed for a pile of soot and dug his arm in to the elbow. When he drew it out there was a bit of gray bone clutched in his fist.

"Oh, man," Zeke said in disgust, flinging it away from him. The jagged cylinder of bone, its soft heart now empty, sailed across the burned scar of the forest, tumbling as it went. It landed several yards away with a rustling crash.

"I never seen this fire. We could see it from the house, right? How come I ain't seen this fire?"

Zeke avoided his brother's gaze. "Cause it burned before you was born, that's why." He pried his arm out of the refuse. His hand was empty.

"Why ain't it grown back?"

"Dunno," Zeke said as he pulled a claw-like branch off a ruined tree to his side. He dug into the pile of trash with hard, short strokes. An avalanche of damp soot fell on his legs, dirtying his pants.

"Don't make sense that it wouldn't grow back."

"It's a nasty place. And them trees is nasty trees, like they found when they first came here. Ain't like pines nor oaks. No telling what they'd do." He pried into the pile, lifting an edge of it. Small pieces of black rained down.

"That space captain tell you this?"

Zeke turned to his brother, his face white around the smudges of gray. "No, and don't you never tell you been here, understand?"

"Pa'll whup us, I reckon."

"More than that" Zeke said darkly. "Be a lot worse than that. What they done..." His voice failed because his throat felt funny. Picking up the stick, he applied it to the pile again.

"What who done?"

"Everybody." The word came out flat. A dead word from a mouthful of ashes.

"But what was it they done?"

Zeke looked at his brother and then quickly away. "They killed all the demons, that's what."

Daniel shrugged. "Don't sound like no big deal."

"Shows how rot gut stupid you are. That space captain find out, he'd take us all away to jail. And don't never tell nobody I brung you here. It's a real big, grown-up secret." Suddenly Zeke whooped with glee. "Lookit. Found another one of them stones." Stooping, he picked up the piece of sedimentary rock in his hand and gave it to his brother.

"Neat pictures."

"Them's demon pictures. Can't show nobody, okay?"

Carefully Daniel slipped the stone into his pocket. "Okay."

Both boys bent and searched through the rubble for more. Zeke found a clay jar with demon pictures on it and Daniel found two double-pronged arrowheads.

Zeke was startled when he looked up from his search to see that the shadows of the trees had gone long and blue. "Daniel," he said softly when his mouth

had enough spit in it to talk. "Think we need to go on home."

Daniel darted among the black tree stumps, bang-bang-banging away with an imaginary pistol. His voice echoed in the clearing.

"Come on, Daniel. It's late," Zeke said.

The smaller boy laughed as he peered over the top of a fallen tree. "Bang," he said, shooting an index finger at his brother. "Another dead demon."

"I'm gonna go, okay? I'm gonna leave you here and let them ghosts get you."

But Daniel had disappeared behind one of the piles and now was no place to be seen. His absence caused a hollow place to grow inside Zeke's chest.

"Daniel?" he called again.

A deep-throat growl from the northwest made the short hairs on Zeke's neck stand. He stood and sniffed into the breeze. The bass snarl repeated itself.

"Daniel!" Zeke screamed. The scream tore at his throat, making him cough. "Daniel!" He started to cry. "Where are you? Come on! It's gonna rain."

Abruptly Daniel was there, looking up with astonishment at the tears on his big brother's face.

They set about the field of ash at a stumbling run, Zeke clutching Daniel's arm. The breeze teased once before it turned fresh and fierce, lifting the hair on their foreheads and tugging at their shirts.

At the edge of the forest Daniel fell to his knees. Zeke paused to help him up, and then they ran on, their lungs sucking in the humid air. Odd orange-encrusted twigs caught at their clothes and whipped into their faces.

"I'm tired," Daniel whined as he tried to pull out of Zeke's grasp.

"Not now. We gotta get home. We gotta get home quick."

Daniel dropped to the ground, nearly pulling Zeke off his feet. "Let go of me. I'm tired. My legs hurt. Got blisters on my feet."

Zeke turned. Lifting his arms, he beat his brother about the head and shoulders with his open palms. "Get up! Get up, damn it! Get up right now!"

Daniel let Zeke's stinging blows fall on his back. "Pa'll whup you for saying 'damn.'"

"I don't give a shit about a whupping," Zeke said. Abruptly he stopped hitting his brother and fell down next to him on the ground. His arms wrapped themselves around his shoulders. "Danny. Danny. We gotta get home." Zeke was crying so hard now he looked like Daniel when he cried. His nose ran.

"Don't know why you're afraid of the rain. Rains ever night," his brother said with a pout. He rubbed his shoulder where his brother had hit him.

"Dark comes with the rain, Danny," Zeke whispered. "Dark comes."

The thing to the northwest gave a growl that shook the trunk behind their backs. "We ain't never gonna make it home now," Zeke said in a thin, cry-baby voice that embarrassed him. "Oh, God. Shouldn't of ever come. We ain't never gonna make it home before dark."

As soon as he said it, it was like it had already happened. Everything fell into place. Daniel and Zeke

had sinned and now God was going to get them. Without interest he watched as his little brother shook dirt out of his shoe.

"I'm ready," Daniel said, his bright face turned up. "Said I'm ready. You deaf, or what?"

Blindly Zeke got to his feet and stumbled his way through the strange-smelling trees.

They were still in the old forest when the last bit of light began to die. Red leaves became gray. Purple-brown trunks turned to black. The orange moss on the branches began to glow with an unearthly light. A ghostly kind of light.

"Oh, God forgive me," Zeke said half to himself. "I shouldn't never showed you that rock."

"Pa's gonna whup us sure," Daniel said, missing the point.

A fat, cold drop fell on the back of Zeke's hand, and he remembered that they were going to die. Dying didn't seem real, but the ghosts did. He could imagine them coming out, rank after rank of them, glowing in the night like that orange moss, wanting to know where their stone pictures were. Wanting their arrowheads back. Asking why he threw that bone.

"It's raining," Daniel said in a complaining voice.

"I know."

Coming out from the old forest was like coming out of a grave. The wind bent the tops of the pines. Across the west lightning flashed, leaving a pink after-image on Zeke's retina.

The rain was nearly too loud to talk over. Zeke found his way around the soft rises of land where the trees grew thick. Dragging his brother along by the hand, he sought the clear, open spaces, the lower spots, where water splashed ankle high.

"You sure we ain't lost?" Daniel asked in a strained shout.

"Guess it don't matter if we're lost or if we ain't."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked, his voice barely louder than the rushing of the water.

Instead of answering, Zeke pulled Daniel up with him into the nearest thicket. They sat together at the foot of a pine, huddled against the rain.

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked again. "What do you mean it don't matter?" The sound of the rain under the branches was a steady drip, drip, drip instead of the wild howl it had been in the open.

"We ain't going home, Danny."

"Sure we are. We're going home." Daniel's voice was shrill.

"No, we ain't. We ain't never gonna make it. We're gonna die just like all them others."

He wondered what the ghosts would look like when they came. He'd only seen their bones. They had had long arms and clawed feet. Would their eyes bulge with dark glee when they saw them? Zeke wondered. And would Downy Phoebes and Horace Watson and Barney Potts be with them? Next to his right side Daniel cuddled, a line of warmth down his ribs.

Zeke disentangled himself from his brother and stood up. "You stay here a minute. I'm going up more in the trees, see if I can see our house lights from here."

"Okay," Daniel said doubtfully.

"I mean it. You stay here. Right where I can find you. Don't you move, understand?"

"I ain't deaf."

Zeke pushed his way through the prickly needles until he found a steady tree to climb. Easing himself into the lower branches, he saw a faint light to the south. The wind blew and the glow vanished, leaving him wondering if he had seen it at all.

Clambering down the tree, he walked to the right, keeping his eyes on the spot where he thought the glimmer might have been. Three yards later he lost his footing and fell into a blackberry bush. His legs were caught in something thicker than water; less thick than mud.

Pulling on the bush, he eased his body forward. The muck gave his legs back with a disappointed pop. When he tried to push himself up, the ground swallowed his arm to his shoulder.

"Jesus," he whimpered.

He jerked on the bush so hard that he stripped leaves away. Earth crept into his open mouth; embraced his chest and clambered up his back. Rain fell into his eyes, but he had no free hand to wipe it away. It was then he learned a great, adult truth about death, that sometimes it's less painful than simply inconvenience.

Something moved in the bushes to his right. His breath stopped in his throat.

"Zeke?" something said. It sounded like his brother.

Zeke didn't answer. He pictured the bug-eyed thing not five yards away. Its wide toe-claws would have dug into the dirt. The long hands would be at its side, waiting.

"Zeke?" Daniel asked. "You okay?"

The terrified little voice could only have come from Daniel. Ghosts didn't have anything to be scared of. Now that he was pretty sure he wasn't going to drown, Zeke felt sort of stupid.

"I'm here," he said quietly. "Don't come no closer. There's real bad sticky mud. You'll get caught."

There were thrashing noises as Daniel oriented himself.

"Okay. Now, what I need for you to do is lay down in this blackberry bush and grab me."

Daniel's voice was pouty. "But them thorns'll eat me alive."

"Damn it, Daniel!" Zeke snapped. "Lay down in that bush and grab my hand! Hear me? You hear me? If you don't help, I'm gonna drown!" There was no reply. There was no movement of the bush, either. He could picture Daniel on the other side, thinking it out. "Daniel!"

"Yeah?"

"You lay down in that bush right now, and you grab my hand, hear? This is real serious. This ain't no game or nothing."

There was the crunch of vegetation and then, "Ow," and another, "Ow." Daniel's small fingers found Zeke's.

The suction gave Zeke's body back to him in little parts: an arm, a leg, a foot. When it was over, he lay

on his back on the blackberry bush, hardly noticing the thorns.

"You said we was gonna die," Daniel said.

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, we gonna die, or what?" Daniel sounded confused rather than frightened.

"I reckon," Zeke said got up on his and knees. His body didn't want to hold him.

"I'm hungry," Daniel said.

Zeke crawled his way to the solid ground under the pines. He curled up under the canopy.

"I'm cold," his brother said.

Zeke's eyes were closing in spite of the ghosts.

"Pa's gonna come for us, ain't he?"

"No, Daniel. Pa ain't gonna come for us. Nobody will." Nobody living, he remembered.

He wondered if he'd fight to protect Daniel. He should. That's what brothers were for. But he didn't know if love could be stronger than fear, even though Reverend Sorenson said it cast fear out. It'd be easier if the ghosts took them both together. He prayed for that, and in the middle of prayer fell into a sweet, forgetful sleep.

The next time Zeke opened his eyes it was daylight. Over his head a line of ants crawled in fire-drill order down the resinous bark of a pine.

Zeke sat up and touched himself all over before checking Daniel. His little brother was sleeping, chest tucked to legs like a cat. His pink mouth was open. "Daniel," Zeke whispered, shaking him by one shoulder.

A blue eye wavered open.

"Daniel. I think we're alive."

A thin sound, something between a snore and a complaint, came from the open mouth. Daniel turned over. He made a snicking sound with his throat.

Zeke dug in his shirt pocket and found the small jar, still intact. Stick figures marched themselves around the sides, their stick hands piled with things. Food, maybe. Maybe flowers. It didn't show it, but he imagined the figures had once been happy.

"Daniel," Zeke called after a while.

This time Daniel sat up, rubbing his eyes. "I'm hungry," he said.

"I know. Let's check and see if the ground's solid, and then we'll go on home."

Daniel ran before Zeke could catch him. His small legs pumped; his hands windmilled. With a whoop he darted down the side of the slope to where Zeke had nearly drowned. His feet made shallow impressions in the mud.

After steeling himself, Zeke followed. The spot would have looked innocent in the sunlight except that the blackberry bush was stripped of its leaves.

Daniel stopped running to limp. His feet must have still been bothering him. "Are we the only ones who ever made it back?"

"So far as I know," Zeke said. Somehow that bothered rather than cheered him.

Daniel, though, was beside himself. "We're gonna be famous. We're gonna be spoke about in service, and they're all gonna thank God that we come back."

"Uh huh," Zeke said doubtfully. "But you know



what?"

Daniel had never liked the you-know-what game. Instead of replying, he kicked the smooth floor of the hollow.

Zeke suddenly realized why there were no pebbles on the path. "I had the feeling like that gunk could of buried me right there, with no sign of me left behind."

"I don't get it," Daniel said. He was grinning ear-to-ear, too happy about their being special to think about anything else.

"What if there ain't no ghosts, Daniel? What if that night mud was what caught up Downy Phoebes and Horace Watson and all them others?"

Daniel was skipping in spite of his bad feet.

"Daniel?" Zeke asked worriedly. "What if there ain't no ghosts?"

The idea horrified Zeke. He'd lived with the ghosts all his life. They'd been a fixture, just like Ma and Pa had been a fixture. Thinking that the ghosts might not be real left him with a sense of vertigo that might have been relief or loss.

"We'll just tell them, that's what," Daniel said after a moment's thought. "Then we'll be more famous than ever."

Zeke chewed his lip as he followed his brother. By the time they reached the house, his mouth was raw.

The house was too quiet. The stock hadn't been put out of the barn. The chickens were still in the coop. He drew his brother back toward the nearest stand of trees and waited.

"I'm hungry," Daniel said. "I want to see Ma."

"I know. Shut up."

A little while later Pa opened the door and set off across the yard. Zeke stood up. Daniel stood with him.

Pa glanced toward them and stopped in his tracks, his face white against the red plaid of his shirt. Then he stepped back a few paces and whipped his hand through the air three times, shooing them away.

Daniel stopped trying to squirm out of his brother's grasp. He halted, confused. "Pa?" he asked.

The callused hand moved like a hatchet across the air. Whip, whip.

"Pa!" Zeke called, his voice reasonable. "Pa, we made it through. Them ghosts didn't come for us. We're all right."

Pa's narrow brown eyes found his. Whip, whip, went the big hand through the air. Whip, whip.

Pa let the cattle and horses out of the barn. He released the chickens. Ma came out on the porch for a while and, looking toward the place where Daniel and Zeke stood, put her hands over her face and cried. Her hair was down. She still had her nightdress on. Pa gathered her up and led her back inside.

"They don't know we're here," Daniel said. "They ain't seen us."

"They seen us, all right, but maybe we look different or something."

Daniel studied his brother. "You look ugly as ever."

Zeke didn't feel like laughing.

"Pa's mad, ain't he?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah."

"When he decides to, he's gonna whup us blind."

Zeke looked down at the silent house and didn't say a thing.

The sun rose higher. Three red chickens pecked in the dirt of the yard. Pa came out with Ma. Ma was dressed in black. Pa set the bay gelding into the traces of the wagon and they rode off to service.

"I'm going on down to get me something to eat." Daniel clambered to his feet and looked down at Zeke expectantly.

Zeke had his arms wrapped around his knees and was staring straight ahead. "You just go ahead, then. I ain't gonna bother stopping you. I'm tired and my hands is all cut up from them bushes. But I'm telling you there's something not right here. There's something real bad wrong."

"With Pa?"

Zeke put his head down on his arms and didn't answer. Daniel stayed on his feet a minute, just to show his big brother he wasn't chicken. When he did sit, he acted casual about it.

After service, Pa and Ma drove up, old Reverend Sorenson, Pete Jones and Hady Miller behind them. They all looked towards the place where Zeke and Daniel waited. Pa seemed startled to see them still there. He sent Ma into the house and shooed them away.

They didn't go.

"Pa!" Zeke called. "I don't think there are no ghosts. I don't think there's no ghosts noplac."

Old Reverend Sorenson said something about Satan. His voice didn't carry.

Pete and Hady got out the deer rifles from their saddles.

"They're going hunting with Pa again," Daniel said.

With a little groan of horror, Zeke grabbed up his brother quick and tried to lead him away. Daniel wriggled out from under his arm and ran across to the grown-ups.

"Danny!" Zeke wailed as he saw the flash of Daniel's feet and the glint of Hady Miller's gun as he set it on his shoulder. To the side Pa put his hands up to his face, a gesture more like Ma would have made.

Daniel's head burst open in a spray of pink. It looked like Hady had shot into a melon. Momentum carried him two steps more before he fell in the dust of the yard. Ma banged out the door and Pa caught her. She was shrieking as loud as Zeke was.

Pete Jones put a gouge in a pine tree two feet from where Zeke stood. Peter never had been much of a shot. Zeke ducked under a pine bough, fled a few yards into the forest and stopped, bewildered. There was no other place he could go. Turned out like he was, there were no other people who would take him in.

Pete and Hady were out on the porch. Pa, Ma and Reverend Sorenson had gone inside. Daniel lay spraddled in the yard, his legs twisted as if he were still running.

The space captain would help him, if only Zeke could wait the six months till he came back. Zeke guessed he probably couldn't make it. He thought about living out in the wild without Daniel. He thought about hunger. He thought about cold.

Daniel had died in ignorance, but Zeke decided he wouldn't. He didn't want to die by chance, either. Chance might be a whole lot worse. He and Daniel had done something they shouldn't have, and, one way or another, they were going to pay. Zeke was old enough to understand the relationship between God and man; between man and boy.

He stepped out from behind the tree and started down in a steady walk towards the yard. Hady — thank God it was Hady — raised his rifle and sighted slow.

— ABO —

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A Hero of the Spican Conflict

By Bruce Boston

*I'm talking blood, mate,
when the lasers come on target
and there's scrap flying everywhere,
when human skin shreds like paper
and the red keeps raining down.*

*I'm talking heat, brother,
all at once and plenty of it,
when the probes find their mark
and those rooted and toothy carnivores
which pass for trees begin to moan.*

*Heat enough to fry your eyeballs
and high broil your brains,
unless you're head deep in a hole
you've hacked for yourself from
the bleached and bone-hard soil
of this extraterrestrial hell.*

*I'm talking plague, man,
alien viruses fragging your genes,
pustules sprouting on your forearms,
and when the ampoules are gone
you kill your company one by one
and still the sickness rages.*

*I'm talking pain and desolation
and the damn damp jungle closing
down around you like a sleeve,
until you're the last one,
alone for a night of two days
in a world of unclassified toxins,
the darkness rife with monstrosities,
an acid rain burning your breath
and etching scars upon your cheeks.*

*And each time they send you up
salvaged and rebuilt for combat,
the stench of death grows heavier
in your mind until it's palpable
as your own artificial flesh,
until whatever remains of the you
you once knew is of less and less
use to them or you or anybody else.*

*I'm talking pensioned, friend,
pastured and propped in the sun,
restructured to the finest details,
a mind full of unrelenting horror,
the table full of medals before me,
a metal chest to pin them on.*

— ABO —

Fluxed in Nova Byzantium

By Ralph E. Vaughan

Art By Leslie Pardew

The heat was fierce, potent enough to blister an icon's hide — or so it seemed to Detective Hapline MacGreggor. This was no ordinary heatwave gripping Nova Byzantium. It frayed tempers and cut them deathly short. Three days of heat and the homicide rate had more than doubled.

"Lunch?" Hap asked.

His partner was sprawled in the passenger seat of the steamer, eyes closed, content to let the hot wind slap his face through the open window. Theo Papilagios was a thin, gray man, nearly thirty years Hap's senior. The heat made him seem even more haggard and drawn than usual.

"Yeah, Hap, fine with me," he muttered. "Just something light and very cold to drink. This heat's all but murdered my appetite."

The streets were packed. Hap concentrated on getting out of the downtown jam of pedestrians and steamers. A shadow passed over them; Hap looked up. It was Airship One, the airship of the Emperor, in from a trans-Atlantic crossing and carrying the new Emperor, Michael III Annelica, on his first visit to Nova Byzantium. The ornate airship, its many steam engines chugging, was heading for the mooring mast of the Emperor's State Building.

"A remarkable Emperor, from what I've read," Hap commented.

Theo opened one eye and squinted at the airship.

Gradually they made their way out of the urban center, where they'd been summoned to investigate a body found in an alley. Just a bum, probably killed by another bum. After three days of heat, it was no longer a novelty.

"Here we are," Hap said, braking the steamer.

Theo sat up slowly and looked around. "When you go slumming, you don't believe in half-measures."

"That cafe is the best."

"Sure."

"And it has beer colder than ice."

"Now you're talking."

Hap and Theo climbed out of the auto and reluctantly buckled on their short swords. Hap had never used the traditional weapon for anything more deadly than slicing meat and cheese. He had much more confidence in his ability with his Colt Dragon .475, that seven-shot monster that slept in the upside-down break-away holster under his left arm.

Hap walked around the auto. A hot wind tousled

his dark hair and ruffled his kilt. Hap noticed Theo's envious glance.

"It's pretty cool," Hap said.

"Maybe I'll go primitive too," Theo replied.

"Damned heat's getting to me."

The heatwave had hit the city totally unexpectedly. Hap had listened to meteorologists on the radio. They spoke of stationary fronts and sunspots, but they made as much sense as the radio priests with their tirades against sin. It was a damned mystery.

They walked slowly toward the dilapidated cafe, conserving energy. Though the cafe was good, Hap had to admit that it was in a bad part of town, one of the sections hardest hit during the Blue/Green riots a few years back.

A woman's scream cut through the air.

Weapons drawn (revolvers, not swords), Hap and Theo rushed toward the screams. At an alley entrance, a wild-haired hag with feral eyes crashed into them. They steadied her, holding on, refusing to let go. She saw them, and her shrieks dissolved into wracking sobs.

"It's murder!" she cried. "Godawful cruel murder!"

"Calm yourself down," Hap snapped.

"Yes, woman, we're the law."

"It's godawful cruel murder," she sobbed, less hysterically.

"Tell us what happened," Theo said.

"In the alley," she gasped. "I was tending my own business, hunting reclaimables, when I seen him. He was there. Half there."

"What are you babbling about?" Hap demanded.

"A murdered man," she said, her voice starting to rise again. "Someone done cut him in half. Laying there, he was. From the waist up, he was there; waist down was somewhere else. Done cut him in half and dumped half in the alley."

"Have you..." Theo made a tipping motion.

The woman crossed herself. "By the blood of Jesus, sirs."

"You stay here," Theo said. "My partner and I will check it out. If this is a false report, by God, you'll have a room for a week."

"Blessed Virgin be a cow if I'm lying, sirs." She crossed himself again.

When Hap let go of the woman, she collapsed to the pavement. The two detectives cautiously entered



the alley. The alley was laced with shadow, but was no cooler. Hotter, if anything. It was torrid and dead and smelled of lost souls and shattered dreams. Hap told himself it was nothing more than a garbage-strewn alley, but something terrible might have happened here. He saw something under a stairway.

Hap gestured, not trusting his voice.

"Sweet Mother of God," Theo murmured. Despite the oaths he'd taken to become a policeman, he had never been big on religion. Now he crossed himself with the barrel of his revolver.

The torso of the man lay under the stairs, in deep shadow. His back was turned to them. Below the waist there was nothing, just empty space. Just as the street woman had said, some maniac had cut a man in half, leaving only half.

Hap and Theo, fascinated by the dreadful sight, moved closer.

The man who was only half there writhed around to face them.

"Thank goodness," the man breathed. "I thought no one...that crazy woman. Please pull me through."

When Hap moved forward, Theo followed. They holstered their weapons. They crouched under the stairs.

"Take the left," Hap said.

Hap and Theo grabbed the bisected man under the arms and pulled. Nothing happened. To an observer, it would have seemed a tableau of two and a half people. The detectives strained. New sweat layered old sweat. A half-step back, then a full one. They were making some kind of progress.

Hap glanced down the shortened body of the man. His hips were visible now, and his legs were sliding in to view, from somewhere, or nowhere. Then the three of them flew back and landed in a heap.

"That was harder than I thought it would be," the man gasped. "Talk about a salmon fighting its way upstream. Oh brother!"

Hap sat up. "Who the hell are you and what just happened?"

"Fair questions," he said. "My name is Carl Lesser. As far as what happened and where I'm from, that will take a bit of explaining. This isn't the place." He looked around. "Please tell me what city this is and the date. The full date."

"You're in Nova Byzantium, administrative capital of the New Territories of New Rome," Hap replied after a moment. "The date is September 16, 1986."

The man sighed. "Ah. About a half-hour after noon?"

Theo looked at his pocketwatch. "Thirty-three."

"Zero time lapse."

Theo said: "You'd better come with us, but you're not under arrest."

"Are you police officers?"

"Detectives," Hap explained. "Homicide division."

Introductions were made.

"Let's take him to your place," Theo said. "This would be too weird for my wife. Hell, it's probably too weird for me, but I won't run to our priest about demons from Hell."

"Damn, it seems hotter," Hap said.

Theo loosened his collar.

"The heat is partly my fault," Carl said. "Partly. But things are going to get worse if I don't find a certain man. And I don't mean just the heat."

The woman was gone when they reached the mouth of the alley, which was just as well.

Heading to Hap's apartment, Carl Lesser held silence. They parked in the underground garage of Hap's building and rode up the clackety elevator. Hap let them into the apartment, then locked the door. He poured drinks of the strong stuff. No ice cubes. His icebox was doing well just to keep the food cool. They all sat in the tiny living room.

"The first thing I have to tell you is that I am not from this world," Carl said. He smiled thinly. "Considering the condition you found me in, that should not be too hard to accept."

"You mean Venus, Mars, something like that?" Theo asked skeptically.

"Surely not Heaven or Hell," Hap said self-consciously. He had not been to church services in nearly a year.

"Nothing like that," Carl said with a short laugh. "The world I'm from is closer, yet much farther. My world occupies the same time and space, but a different line of existence. The same planet, but with a different history. In my world, the Empire of New Rome, what we call the Byzantine Empire, fell in 1453, when the Turks destroyed Constantinople."

"Ridiculous," Theo said, somewhat weakly. "Constantinople's never been conquered by anyone."

"Not in your world, but in mine," Carl said. "You've never heard of the Confederate States of America, have you?"

"No."

"That's because our histories diverged sometime in the past," Carl continued. "Even with extensive research I doubt we could discover the cause of the divergence. But there was a split. Do you follow what I'm trying to say?"

Theo shook his head, but Hap said: "Different events create different worlds? Real worlds with an objective reality?"

"Exactly. I'm from one of those worlds."

"What about the condition we found you in?" Hap asked.

"It was harder to break through than I'd planned. Took more energy. I tried to come through too soon." He sighed. "I tried to get that woman to help me, but I doubt she saw anything once she started screaming."

"History is history," Theo insisted quietly. "Are you trying to say that every time an event has multiple outcomes that new worlds are created?"

"No, not quite," Carl admitted. "I used to think so. But I've found that not all timelines are stable. Most end up collapsing back on the timeline they split from, creating energy fluxes which take many forms. Ever seen rain fall from a cloudless sky? Strange lights or animals reported? Ever experience a feeling of being someplace before though you know you haven't? Have you ever been uncertain about the validity of a past event or whether something was real or

just a very vivid dream?"

"Nearly everyone has," Hap said.

"Those are all manifestations of collapsing timelines," Carl said. "Most decisions or alternate outcomes don't make one whit of difference in the larger sense of the timeline. They just collapse. Some events with multiple outcomes, however, do make a difference, and those are the events that have the greatest chances of creating a stable divergent timeline, of overcoming the inertia of the parent timeline. The longer a timeline endures, the more stable it grows."

"All right. I can follow your line of reasoning," Theo said. "And I guess I have to believe you. Either that or come up with some other explanation for the way we found you." He sighed wearily. "Jesus, it's hot in here."

Hap said: "You said you were to blame for this heat."

"Partly to blame," Carl corrected. "Forcing my way into your timeline created something of a constant and stationary energy flux, which has the appearance of a heatwave. It's been inexplicable, hasn't it?"

Hap's eyes narrowed. "Yes, it has, but it also started three days ago."

"That brings me to the reason I came here," Carl said. "Has there — you're probably in a position to know — has there been a rise in the homicide rate, perhaps, especially, among people living in the streets?"

"Well, the heat and... yes."

"There is a murderer in your city who murders just for the thrills it gives him," Carl said. "He is not of your world but mine. His name is Kyle Watson. Until three days ago, he worked with me at the Consolidated Universities of New York, where I am employed. Kyle was linked to a series of brutal murders. He used the timeline investigation device to escape into your world. The police of my world think he just blew town. I could hardly tell them the truth."

"I'd always known that Kyle was, well, a bit unstable, but I'd never considered him violent. He's a genius. If it hadn't been for Kyle, I probably would not have been able to transform my dreams into reality. We were conducting final tests when I learned he'd been murdering men and women living in the streets."

"And you think he's here to practice his hobby?" Hap ventured.

Carl nodded. "He likes to kill. I discovered a diary in his room in which he had recorded the details of every murder he'd ever committed, from the first kitten he tossed into a lit oven. And he was planning a crime to give him the biggest thrill he'd ever known."

"What?"

"Kyle planned on killing the President, the leader of my country," Carl explained. "A world away, President Long is visiting New York City. Kyle Watson may be back to his old ways in Nova Byzantium, but the President is safe."

There was a thunk against the door.

"Afternoon newspaper," Hap muttered, standing.

He opened the door, picked up the newspaper, looked at the headline, closed the door, and tossed the open newspaper onto Carl Lesser's lap. "Your President may be safe, but our Emperor is not."

Carl looked down at the engraving stretched across three columns of the newspaper. It showed the arrival of Airship One in Nova Byzantium.

"He'll do it," Carl said. "He won't be able to pass it up."

"Great, a heatwave and an assassin," Theo said breathlessly.

"The murders must be stopped and your Emperor must be saved, of course," Carl said, "but the energy flux phenomenon is more dangerous. The heat will increase to a point, then will likely spread. Other phenomena will occur. What's more, entropy is a two-way street between timelines. When I left New York City, we were experiencing the coldest September day in history, and it was getting colder. I have to put things in order by taking Kyle back to our own world, and quickly. I've been thinking. If I had a place to work, I might be able to construct a device to return us. It would be some jury-rigged slap-dash thing, but it would probably work. At least the energy level won't be such a problem, which is a good thing from what I've seen of this world's technology. It'll be like water returning to its own level — the opposite of what I had to go through to get here."

Hap had stopped listening. He was staring at Theo. The flushed face, the shallow breathing, the unfocused eyes — Hap knew the signs well, especially since the start of the heatwave. He rushed to his friend's side.

"Lie down, Theo," he said gently.

"What's the matter?" Carl asked.

"Call an ambulance."

"Nine-one-one?"

"What? Never mind. Stay with him while I make the call."

Hap's status in the police department helped bring an ambulance sooner than one would have arrived on its own. He felt helpless as he watched his friend carried out on a stretcher. They had been partners for five years, and five years is as good as a lifetime for two men. Hap called Theo's wife, whom he knew slightly, and told her what had happened. He hung the receiver back on the body of the phone and turned to Carl Lesser.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

"You don't let yourself fall to pieces, that's for sure," Carl said. "You have to find me a place to work and you have to help me get to Kyle Watson. Like it or not, we've got the job. I'm sorry about Theo, but the only way we're going to help anyone is to do what we have to do."

Hap sighed and gazed out the open window, at the city that shimmered like a mirage. "What do you need?"

"Electronics equipment, the most advanced."

"I can get you into the police laboratory with little problem. The stuff there should be as good as any."

(Continued to page 40)

Minutes of the Last Meeting at Olduvai

By Steven R. Boyett

Art By Courtney Skinner

"My fellow *australopithecenes*..."

Og banged his branch against the cave floor to bring the assembly to order. "I'd like to start tonight's meeting by thanking the females for gathering wood for the fire; I know it's hard to find dry wood because of the rains —" he glanced upward — not that any of us are *complaining*, you understand," he added.

There were grunts of approval.

"All right," he continued. "Now, Zook, who's probably our best thinker, has been working on an idea that he says can't sit for another full Moon. As your duly elected tribal head I have granted his request to discuss tonight's meeting. I think we can save the clay-pot-improvement reports, herd-movement assessments, and weapons-innovation debates for another time. Any objections?"

None of the group raised a hairy hand, but one of the Hunters, a flint-chipper named Crug, muttered, "Do it matter? Always he talk. Talk, talk. Everyone is talk." He shook his head.

The group listened politely; most of them pitied Crug's difficulty with the new language.

Og motioned Zook into the semicircle formed by the Tribe.

Zook was an old thinker in his late twenties. His few remaining teeth were rotting. The hair covering his stooped body was thinning, wiry, and gray. He stared at the fire a moment as if hypnotized. Orange points of light winked in his deep brown eyes. He smiled and reached a hand toward the flame, then drew it back and turned to face the group.

He rubbed his crotch thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "I'm not one to make a fuss, but I think the survival of our people is threatened."

There was much stirring and muttering and pulling on penises. "Two problems face us, really," he continued when it settled down. "One has led to the other. The first is our ability to think, and the second is our ability to talk."

There was a shocked silence that made the fire's crackle seem loud. Finally Crug said, "What? Say he what?"

"Care to elaborate a bit, Zook?" asked Og, finger-

ing his branch.

"My pleasure." Zook tried to draw himself to his full, four-foot height and failed pathetically. He picked up a branch from the pile at the feet of the females and tossed it onto the fire. He watched it catch the flames, then turned back to the group.

"I'm an old man," he began, "and I've had a lot of time to think. Often I think back and remember the Before. I remember how I would feel the sun on my fur. I would just... *feel* it, nothing more. Nowadays I wonder, What is this, the sun? How can I feel it but not touch it?" He raised a hand above their heads. "I see the lightning and wonder if it comes from the Moon. How far away is the Moon?" The hand lowered. "Before, I just felt the sunlight, saw the lightning, watched the Moon."

"But Zook," said a hunter named Kee, "how can wondering be bad? I mean, if we didn't question things, we wouldn't have the fire, or the spear, or anything." He glanced around at the others. "Am I right?"

"I'm not finished!" Zook snapped. His tone changed to mimic Kee's: "Yes, we have the fire and spear, and all that, but what has it taken away from us? What have we given up to have these things?"

He squatted on his haunches and rubbed his palms together. "We *judge* everything now. Before, it was Oh, look, there's a bird; and Oh, look, there's a mountain. Now it's all, Is it right? Is it wrong? Is it good, is it bad?" He shook his head. "Yesterday I invented a pair of moccasins — there's nothing to them; I could show you faster than you could eat a rat — but it took me all day, because every time I thought I had it right, I'd ask myself, Are these *good* moccasins? Are they the sort of moccasins I want to invent? What's *wrong* with them? Maybe they could fit better. And I'd just start all over again. I went through a whole antelope skin, when all I wanted was to sew something around my feet to keep the damn rocks from hurting them. I can't look at something anymore without deciding whether I like it! Because we judge, we think we have the *right* to judge."

"But Zook," complained Bert, whose maimed leg



forced him to sew and cook with the females while the others hunted, "we live ever so much better because of our brains. We *eat* better; we're *warm*er in the winter — I remember being *awfully* hungry and cold most of the time, Before." He shivered.

"We *eat* better," countered Zook, "because our brains gave us language, and that helped us with the hunt. But what else has it done? Before, I knew that Kee didn't like me because he'd bare his teeth and throw shit at me. Now, though, we'll meet at the waterhole, or he'll wave to me while I'm pissing on a tree, and he'll say, 'What's new, Zook? How's your thinking going?' And I have to ask myself, 'What is behind his words?'" Zook pounded his knuckles on the cave floor. "It's all one big headache," he said.

"I liked my mate better before she learned how to talk," joked one of the Hunters. The others laughed.

Zook glared at him. "Before," he said coolly, "we didn't used to make jokes at the expense of others."

Og shouldered his club. "All this is fine and good, Zook, but how is our survival threatened?"

"When the leopard attacks the gazelle, Og," replied Zook, "the gazelle doesn't *think* about running away, or what its options are, or what, exactly, this leap by the leopard really *means*. The gazelle just runs. Os —" he snorted. "We *think* about that pouncing leopard, then we *decide* on a course of action, and *then*, finally, we move. And the gazelle goes on grazing while we find out what a leopard looks like on the inside."

He stood. "Do the monkeys fall out of trees and break their necks because they were reaching for the Moon? No — we do! Now we have speech, where Before there was none — and now we have misunderstanding and confusion where Before there was none!" He massaged his prominent supraorbital ridge, then ran a hand along the bony crest at the top of his head. "We can become so preoccupied with this thinking nonsense that we can lose our sense of the things around us. I've been so taken with my new idea that I nearly walked off a cliff! Why? Because I was *lost in thought*! Because of thinking, I might have been dead and broken at the bottom of the gorge, and who knows where these leaky old bones would have ended up?"

Og merely shrugged, pinched a louse from his fur, and crushed it between forefinger and recently opposable thumb. "Even if you're right, what can we do about it? We can't make ourselves not know what we already know."

Narrow brows wrinkled throughout the cave.

Crug stood. "Talk," he said. "I hear only you talk. Thinking — ha!" He spat toward the fire. "I not liking your thought stuff. It — it make me wanting to scratch inside my head."

"I think Zook has a point, Og," piped Bert. "I think we're a little more . . . *distant* from things than we used to be. I mean, we talk now about 'the animals' as though we're something *apart* from them. But Before, I don't remember thinking I was any different from the rest of them."

"I don't remember thinking anything at all," quipped a voice from the back.

Bert ignored it. "And what about our *parents*?" he continued, rising now that he was gaining momentum. He cocked a slim hip. "We started doing these things almost all at once, and so *fast* that we don't even *remember* what it was like for *them*." One delicate hand went against his bony chest; the thin fingers splayed. "But at night I hear the voices of the Ones Before. We *all* hear them. They don't *say* anything, but they're *happy* voices. *Content* voices." Slim hand lowered to sharp-bladed hip. "Sure, our parents were afraid of us. But to them we were still a *part* of them, and they were a part of everything. But us — we *knew* we weren't like them... just because we *knew*." He shrugged.

Og sighed and lowered his branch. "And where does this lead us? I ask again: even if Zook's right, what can we do about it? Forget it all, just like that?"

Zook cleared his throat. "That's right," he said. "What Bert was talking about — that's the answer. At night we hear the murmurs of the Ones Before. We *remember*." He shrugged. "Maybe it's because at night we are tired from the day, and we let go a bit of our thinking and talking, and the Before comes back. Only it never really was gone. It's as if thinking is a loud new voice in a cave full of voices, and if you can just get the thinking voice outside the cave you can hear all the other voices."

Zook scanned the others. Their dark eyes were bright in the firelight as they looked into an inner distance. "They make you want to go back to the Before," he said. "Don't they?"

A female (who had no name because the thought of giving names to females had not yet occurred to anybody) said, "They . . . call. And a part of me wants go back. But a bigger part of me doesn't."

"That is the thinking part of you," explained Zook. "The loudest voice in the cave. But I've learned that if you *listen* to the other voices at night, they become louder. And in the day I have tried to . . . to move and be as I remember *moving* and *being* Before. The more I do this, the more the loud voice fades. It isn't something you can *think* about. Thinking . . . is a muscle that relaxes when you don't use it."

Bert raised a hand, frowning. "You mean," he began, "we *think* . . . about not thinking . . . when the way to *not* think . . . is to *not think* . . . about *thinking*?"

Zook frowned and narrowed his eyes. "I think so," he replied.

Crug the Flint-Chipper banged his marginal forehead against the stony floor. "My head," he moaned. "My head!"

Zook ignored him. "The pull to go back was so strong," he said. "But I wanted to be able to come talk to you tonight, so I fought it. It isn't easy to choose; there's a lot to be said for thinking, even though I think — See! — See! — I think it's too dangerous and too appealing."

Og waited until the cave quieted. "It seems to me," he countered, "that thinking means that we are aware of what we do. Are we all agreed on that?"

They were.

"So being aware of what we do," he continued, "means we have to take the *blame* for what we do."

He paused to let this sink in. "So for Zook to tell us to forget our thinking is to tell us to run away from the blame — or the credit — for what we do."

The assembly mulled it over, and Og smiled, knowing he had struck home.

"But right now," argued Zook, "our thinking, and the responsibility it carries, allows us to choose." He paused again while they quieted.

"Our intelligence becomes a more powerful thing every day," he continued. "We are growing dependent on it, and that may be our downfall. Who can know if the thing that destroys us someday is a thing we ourselves think up?"

He scanned their sober, firelit faces. "Soon we may have no choice in the matter," he said. "The voices of the Ones Before will be gone, and only the loud voice will remain." He paused. "I can teach you how to ignore it," he said. He met Og's flinty eyes. "Perhaps choosing to get rid of our ability to choose is the best — and maybe the only — choice."

Crug covered his eyes with a stubby-fingered hand. "Dizzy!" he announced. "I am so dizzy!" He moaned.

"I have argued for what I feel, Zook," Og said formally, "and you have argued for what you feel. Let us ask for a show of hands, and those who raise their hands with you may be taught to go back to the Before. The rest of us —" he smiled wickedly — "will think about it some more."

Zook could almost hear Og adding to himself, *And rule well*. Still, he saw little alternative.

"Fair enough," he said.

Og turned to the group and ceremoniously banged his branch against the floor. "Fellow *australopithecenes*," he said. "We have a motion on the floor to abandon our intelligence and our language as detriments to our survival as a species." He glanced at Zook. His eyes were stones. "Do I hear a second?" he asked.

A moment's silence while the Hunters and Gatherers and Makers and females looked among themselves.

"My hands *ache* all the time now," piped Bert. "I say we go back. Second!"

"Second!" said Kee.

"Second!" cried the Hunters.

"Third!" said Crug.

Og banged his branch. "All right, all right. The motion has been seconded. Could we have a show of hands in favor of this motion?" He counted the hands, then motioned for the tribesmen to lower them.

"Again?"

The vote was nearly unanimous, and the meeting adjourned — without another word.

Further meetings were canceled due to lack of interest.

(The author would like to express his gratitude to David J. Schow for his assistance in the revision of this story.)

— ABO —

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Because we have a small staff and putting out a renewal mailing takes a lot of time and energy we'd rather spend improving the magazine, we have decided to let you help us — and help yourself at the same time. Effective Dec. 15, our renewal rate will be the same as our regular subscription rate — if we have to renew you.

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Fluxed

(Continued from page 35)

"From what I've seen it won't be easy anywhere."

"All right, let's get moving." Hap heard something slap smartly against the windowsill. "Sweet Mother of Jesus."

"What's—?" Carl joined him at the window. "Holy Cow."

Very small fish were falling from the bright sky. They writhed as they fell. The shower of fish did not last long, perhaps thirty seconds. People on the street looked up with expressions of awe and fear.

"We'd better move fast, I think," Carl said.

Carl did not speak during the whole of the drive to the police headquarters building. He was too busy gawking.

"Do you know who you are?" Hap asked as they neared their goal.

"Yes, I'm...no, who am I?"

"You're my cousin Carl from Alexandria," Hap replied. "You're attached to the Library there as a research scientist, and you greatly appreciate the opportunity of using the police laboratory while you visit your cousin, who you haven't seen in years."

Carl sat with his mouth open stupidly.

"Did you get all that?" Hap asked.

"Yes, but are you trying to tell me that the Great Library at Alexandria still exists?"

"Of course."

"It wasn't destroyed by the Muslims?"

Hap sighed. "Will you please keep your mind on one thing at a time?"

Lucius Pergammus, the head of the police laboratory, was more than happy to help Hap's cousin pass the time while Hap was busy upstairs. Satisfied that Carl was not going to get himself into any trouble, at least right away, Hap went up to his office to search through records.

"Sorry about what happened to Theo."

"The heat's a holy bitch."

"We're all pulling for Theo."

Hap nodded and murmured his thanks. Bad news, especially when a brother officer was concerned, always spread fast. When the disaster gnats were gone, Hap requested a sheaf of records and found a quiet place to work.

A radio played in the background. Between the secular tunes, the news readers raved on about the heatwave and the visit of Emperor Michael III. Tonight the Emperor was going to give a speech to the students of the University of Nova Byzantium at Socrates Amphitheater, one which would be transmitted on the radio. Hap imagined what the place would be like — people milling about, security present but light, and it would be very easy for an assassin to slip in and find a hiding place. The evening shift was coming on when Hap returned to the laboratory.

"Hap, if this cousin of yours ever decides to settle here permanently, I can assure him a job," Lucius said when Hap walked in. "Where did he get his train-

ing? I stopped bothering him because I couldn't understand what he was doing." The laboratory chief leaned forward. "What's Carl making?"

"Some kind of radio, I suppose," Hap replied. "He's always fooling around with things like that. It's a little out of my line."

Lucius wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his lab coat. "I'll be off now. I'm just going to stay home tonight and drink cold ale while I listen to the Emperor's speech."

Finally Hap and Carl were alone. Carl was packing something in a wood box.

"That's it, huh?" Hap said. "Will it work?"

"It should." Carl shrugged. "It's easier the second time around, like the first models I tried to make. But the equipment was so primitive that—"

"Take the box down to the auto," Hap said, handing over the keys.

"Where are we going?"

"University of Nova Byzantium. The Emperor is going to make a speech there in just over an hour. Go on down. I'll be down in a minute."

Carl shrugged and carried the box down to the steamer. He'd been waiting about five minutes when Hap climbed into the car. Carl studied the expression on the detective's face.

"How is he?"

"He'll pull through," Hap replied. "Let's go."

The evening had not brought any relief from the heat. People dragged through the streets.

"What makes you think Kyle will make his attempt during the speech?"

"He won't have another chance," Hap explained. "This is the only time the Emperor is going to make a public appearance in Nova Byzantium. After the speech, he'll go directly to Imperial House under guard for the night. First thing in the morning, he leaves on Airship One for an official visit of state to the First Speaker of the Aztec Empire. These facts are well known. Watson will have to make his attempt at Socrates Amphitheater or not at all."

"Will we be able to get in?"

"No problem about that," Hap replied. "What about your device?"

"It will be strapped to me," Carl said. "When the time comes, I'll loop a wire around Kyle, bringing both of us under the device's field of influence."

Hap laughed. "Loop it around him? How will you do that?"

"The best way I can," Carl said. "I've studied Aikido, a form of unarmed fighting, for about three years. It's time to see if I've learned anything."

"I could give you my revolver. That might help."

Carl shook his head. "I've always been afraid of guns. That's why I took up Aikido. I can take care of myself."

The darkness that had fallen over the great city was punctuated by pale street lights and the headlamps of rushing steamers. Despite the stifling heat, more people were about than usual, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Emperor.

"Three days ago," Hap said, "a weapon shop was broken into. Several weapons were stolen, including a



long-range high-powered target rifle."

"No time wasted."

"That coincided with the start of the heatwave," Hap continued. "That was also when the police started receiving reports of weird animals, strange sounds, and peculiar lights. They were passed off as silly season leftovers. The murders started then, too. Street people mostly. I didn't see any patterns until I thought there might be a pattern. If I had seen a pattern sooner..."

"Probably wouldn't have mattered," Carl said. "Kyle is plenty smart. He got away with murder for years in my world. How much easier it would be for him here, where he doesn't even exist."

Hap swerved to avoid an animal that leaped into their path.

"Damn!" Carl exploded. "That was a kangaroo!"

The closer they came to the University, the more thronged the streets were. Nova Byzantium was the most important city in the New Territories, but visits of state were rare. A half-mile from their goal, they were forced to park and go the rest of the way on foot. Carl strapped on the device. Hap reached under the seat, pulled out a light cape, shook it off, and handed it to Carl.

"Put this on," he said. "You'll sweat like a pig, but it'll help hide that thing from people who are paid to ask questions." Hap surveyed the results.

"Stick close by me. If anyone asks, it's a radio you're developing for the police. I'll back you up."

They made their way through the swirling crowds.

There was no problem getting into the amphitheater, not with Hap's police credentials.

"That didn't seem very hard," Carl commented.

"Watson would have an easier time," Hap said. "This is the second largest amphitheater in the world. There are more entrances, licit and illicit, than you can count. Let's go down to the stage and look around."

The place was packed and was brightly lit by arc lights. The students present, most with tunics of either blue or green, were chattering excitedly. Probably this was the closest any of them had ever come, or would ever come again, to personally seeing the political and spiritual leader of the New Roman Empire. The excitement even overcame, for the moment, the heat-induced lethargy of the night.

Directly in front of the speaker's platform was a slender spike of metal surmounted by an ornate disk. Not far from the platform were the bevy of radio technicians. The soldiery charged with the safety of the august person of the Emperor eyed Hap and Carl suspiciously, even after seeing Hap's credentials. Under close scrutiny, Hap and Carl moved to center stage, looking about.

"Kyle couldn't get very close," Carl remarked.

"With a target rifle, he wouldn't have to," Hap said. "Look up there."

Carl gazed upward. "What are those little windows for?"

"Spotlights," Hap answered. "For when theatricals are staged."

"They won't be used, will they?"

"No, not with the arc lamps in place. There won't be anyone up there." Carl gripped Hap's arm.

"What's wrong, Carl?"

"I saw a movement up there. I'm sure of it."

Hap pulled Carl toward the right wing. The soldiers were already waving them off.

"He's got to be up there," Hap said. "No other place to get a clear shot and stay safely out of sight."

"What do we do? Alert someone?"

"No, you'll have to take care of Watson yourself," Hap said. "I'll have to stay with the Emperor just in case. Don't get yourself killed, Carl."

"I've never been much of a hero."

"You came here and you're here now."

They shook hands.

Carl Lesser made his way up the marble steps, hurrying as fast as the press of the crowd would allow. Hap moved close to the stage.

A man in blue and green robes (a compromise representative of the two factions) moved to center stage from the wing opposite Hap. He announced the imminent appearance of Emperor Michael III Annellica, ruler of the New Roman Empire. The man moved off and the crowd waited tensely.

Near Hap, a man spoke softly into a microphone, telling the radio audience what was going on.

Hap could no longer see Carl.

A tall black man dressed in the symbolic robes and crown of office walked from the left wing with great dignity. The audience broke into unrestrained applause.

Hap had seen engravings of the Emperor in newspapers and magazines, but the ex-slave from Ethiopia possessed a sense of power and dignity the artists had been unable to quite capture.

Hap shielded his eyes from the glare.

A metal rod extended from one of the little windows.

The crowd quieted.

The Emperor started to speak.

Hap was not really aware of what he was doing until he crashed into the line of soldiers and they went sprawling. People screamed. Soldiers tried to grab Hap, but it was too late.

Hap leaped through the air and crashed into a surprised Emperor, grabbing him about the shoulders and carrying him down. The crack of a rifle was almost lost in the panic of the crowd. Something slammed into Hap's side.

After an eternity, Hap was lifted from the Emperor and thrown aside.

"He's been shot!"

Hap's mind swirled into a burning blackness. He was pulled back by the smell of an ammonia capsule crushed under his nostrils. An elderly man was bending over him.

A military officer holding Hap's credentials moved forward. "You're a hero, MacGreggor. You saved the Emperor's life."

Hap moved a hand down his side and encountered a sodden bandage.

"The ambulance will be here shortly to take you to the hospital," the elderly man said. "You're a lucky young man. If your service sword had not deflected

the bullet into a fleshy part, it would have smashed through your hip, shattering your pelvis and making you a cripple the rest of your life."

"The assassin got away," announced a young soldier, reporting to the military officer. "All I found was this rifle."

The Emperor moved forward, soldiers clustered about. "I owe you my life, Detective MacGregor."

A cool breeze wafted over them.

"Thank God," the Emperor sighed. "This heat-wave finally broke."

Hap felt something wet his cheek.

Showers of blood began to fall from the clear night sky.

—ABO—

Our Alien Publisher

(Continued from page 4)

such permanency, you would hardly expect them to accept an imaginary impoverishment as real, but, as I said, they value everything in terms of money. Nothing is more important to them.

Human beings accept as an article of faith a principle that was articulated by one of their great writers in 1966 in a novel titled *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. The principle is TANSTAAFL, there ain't no such thing as a free lunch. It means nothing comes from nothing. Yet great wealth for a few, manufactured from nothing, is a consequence of the trust they place in money. As soon as creatures agree to accept money as a universal value, they create opportunities for some of their number to amass fantasy wealth without any reference to productive capacity. Without creating anything, without improving anything, without adding any value, these money traders are able to create financial wealth for themselves.

This much is fairly easy to understand. Past this point, I am on shaky ground in trying to interpret a world that doesn't make any sense. As near as I can tell, however, the paradox of fantasy wealth induces disequilibrium, and equilibrium cannot be restored until the paradox is resolved. The paradox must be resolved periodically for the system to continue operating.

The human beings resolve the paradox by agreeing to undergo periodic crashes in which all the fantasy wealth is eliminated and

the traders start over with *real* production, *real* service, *real* work. The result? The Crash of '87, the Crash of 1929, the Panic of 1873, and so on back to the first unscheduled bank holiday in Sumeria three millennia before the invention of the Dow Jones

Averages.

This rite might seem strange to those of us who measure wealth purely in terms of productive capacity, but then so do light beer and fake convertible tops.

—ABO—

Editor's Notes

(Continued from page 5)

To be honest, I was more than a bit skeptical when I first heard of the contest, which awards quarterly prizes of \$1,000, \$750 and \$500 along with an annual prize of \$4,000 for the grand prize winner.

But when I read the anthologies much of my skepticism died. The anthologies are good and the awarding of some serious money for short stories should be applauded. Algis Budrys and crew have done a fine job.

The organization has announced that the contest has been renewed for another year until Sept. 30, 1988.

If you have not sold more than three short stories or published a novel, it's worth giving it a try. Send your manuscript (no more than 17,000 words, with an SASE) to: Writers of the Future Contest, P.O. Box 1630, Los Angeles, CA 90078.

Now why would I gladly plug the competition? After all, if they buy the story it means I won't see it. The answer is simple — the contest has high enough standards that even the stories which don't finish in the money, but just get a commendation, are often publishable. I'm also recognizing a simple fact of life. Writers, being a disloyal and mercenary lot, tend to mail their manuscripts by order of payment. Even though our payment is competitive with many of the markets for short

stories, I suspect many writers don't send their manuscripts here first.

Except my mother. She always sends her's here first because she likes my rejection notes.

—ABO—

Classifieds

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Books

(Continued from page 23)

Tolkien clone either. It is, I think, by any standard a superior work, and it's got a Barker trademark: *There are things in this book you've never seen before.* He did it to us in horror, and now he's doing it again in epic fantasy.

It's an epic that starts with an accountant chasing an escaped pigeon in the backyard of a vacant house in contemporary Liverpool. But things go on from there: He falls into a rug that contains the Fugue, otherwise known as the Weave, a world of wonders woven there by a magical race seeking to avoid its nemesis, the Scourge. The Fugue gets unraveled in the course of things — twice — and adventures ensue both in our world (called by the inhabitants of the rug, disparagingly, the Kingdom of the Cuckoos) and in the Weave. Things do not follow the usual course: No magic thingie is found to save the day. Paradise is, in a way at least, lost. Readers looking for a Tolkien clone probably will be disconcerted: This is not a *comforting* book.

Barker portrays evil vividly, not as something objective like molasses, but as a corruption of the soul. The characters so infected do not ooze evil; they are evil, which is quite another matter. They have succumbed to temptations all of us can feel.

Basically, this is fantasy for grownups, with adult characters who have adult motivations and adult passions. It is strikingly inventive, filled with outrageous imagery, and, yes, touches of horror. I don't think you will soon forget the Rake, an old enemy of a particularly nasty sorceress. She removed all his bones, and now he flaps ragged in the wind, distorted with pain but alive to do her bidding.

Watch for this on the World Fantasy Award ballot next year. But I don't think it'll win a Hugo.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Fantastic Voyage II: Destination Brain

By Isaac Asimov
Doubleday, 1987
332 pp., \$18.95

What do we expect from Isaac Asimov? More of the same, really, but with Asimov that's a good thing. James Blish once referred to him as the "workhorse of science fiction," which indeed he is. Asimov has been writing now for nearly fifty years. He is well into his Late Youth, but he still hasn't written anything that his younger self would have cause to be embarrassed by. I wonder how many other writers that is true for.

If anything, Asimov has gotten slowly better as a novelist. His control of character and structure, and even his use of the



language, are now far ahead of what they were in the days of the first *Foundation* stories. (I went back and reread some of them recently. It was a shock.)

Fantastic Voyage II is not a sequel to *Fantastic Voyage* or even a novelization of a new movie. It is simply Asimov's version of the story. When he was novelizing the movie, he was held by certain constraints. He had to follow the script. Now, he doesn't. It's as if Sturgeon had gone back to his novelization of *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* and done it right.

The resultant story bears superficial resemblance to the original, but the cast of characters is different, the setting is dif-

ferent (in the Soviet Union, as an American scientist is caught up in a Soviet project against a background of international cooperation but lingering dislike), and, of course, the science is a lot better. Asimov knows that shrinking a person down to the size of a molecule isn't possible according to known physics, but he is at least able to tell us what would be required by the physical laws of the universe if such a shrinkage were to be performed. (The plot actually turns on this. The brain visited is that of a Russian scientist in a coma because of an accident in a previous shrinking experiment. Since energy goes into the shrinkage, the Law of Conservation of Energy says that it must come out again. The process of unshrinking gives off heat. Alas, it happened too quickly, the protein in the man's brain was broken down, and he went into a coma.)

As a novel, this is as good as anything Asimov has done. His characterizations, particularly of scientists, are astute and convincing. He maintains a certain amount of suspense, and, once the voyagers are inside the human body, he shows that he has a real flair for description rather than just for characters sitting around talking about scientific problems. In the context of Asimov's work, the book is a curio, but it's a book nearly everyone will enjoy. Expect it on the bestseller lists, but not necessarily on the award ballots.

Rating: ☆☆☆

The Incorporated Knight
By L. Sprague de Camp
and Catherine Crook de Camp
Phantasia Press, 1987
191 pp., \$17.00

Sprague de Camp has been writing a little longer than Asimov. He has, since the 1930s, made the light fantasy — that is, frothy without being bubbleheaded — uniquely his own. *The Incomplete Enchanter* and some others will endure as long as there is a readership for fantasy.

So, what do we expect here? If this book had been written by

the ubiquitous and hypothetically prolific John Doe, we'd say it was pretty good, but it would soon be lost in the backwash of Piers Anthony and imitators.

But it's by the de Camps, so we look at it a little differently. The story is that of Eudoric, a noble knight in a well-imagined but standard fantasy land, who keeps bumping into unknighly realities, mostly economic. Being of a practical bent himself, he shocks his peers by going into business, opening a stagecoach line rather than galumphing around after dragons. (He slays a dragon at the book's opening, but then is run in by the game warden for hunting out of season. Complications follow.)



This kind of novel is a subspecies of parody: The author takes a literary convention, then shows what it would *really* be like. It's been going on since Cervantes at least, and the de Camps can still find humor in this vein. I would rate this book somewhat below their best — the language, for one thing, seems a bit stiffer than usual — but it is still a fun book.

Rating: ★★☆☆

Rogue Pirate

By John Gregory Betancourt
Windwalker Books/TSR, 1987
219 pp., \$2.95

John Betancourt is known to

Aboriginal SF readers for his story in the July-August 1987 issue, and to readers of *Fantasy Book* and *Amazing*, too, but, for most people, this is a book by an unknown. We don't go to it expecting a lot.

That way, you may not be disappointed. Betancourt's first novel (his previous book, *Star-skimmer Captain*, is one of those choose-your-own things, and doesn't count) hasn't got a lot to it. If a major writer with a serious reputation had written this, we would probably fling it across the room, but otherwise....

Imagine a cross between the standard fantasy-quest, pseudo-medieval novel and the standard pirate movie. The story has no more to do with real piracy than did, say, *The Crimson Pirate*. So, Burt Lancaster or Errol Flynn in the world of Conan. That's almost the entirety of it. Typically of the work of a very young writer, everything is second-hand. Very little comes from life.

There is some first-novel roughness here. Betancourt has a tendency to reach for the mudiest or the most clichéd phrase at times, but once he gets going, the result is a competent, extremely lightweight adventure story. It has a certain what-happens-next addictiveness to it, just like a pirate movie on Saturday afternoon TV.

Rating: ★★

The Penguin World Omnibus of Science Fiction

Edited by Brian Aldiss and Sam J. Lundwall
Penguin Books, 1986
320 pp., \$4.95

A book for the adventurous reader, embodying a noble idea: SF is not a North American, or even exclusively Western, phenomenon, so editors Aldiss and Lundwall have compiled (with the help of the World SF Organization, which apparently voted on the stories) a volume of stories that is truly international in scope: one story from each country, including some from countries you would never expect

to produce SF. There is even one from Ghana, which is, as far as I know, the first SF from Black Africa to be published in the West — "An Imaginary Journey to the Moon," by Victor Sabah, which presents its subject matter as fairy tale, as purely a matter of childlike fantasy, even though it was written *after* space travel had become a reality.

The stories tend to be short and are sometimes mere sketches of ideas, but it is hard to make any generalization. This is a volume of *explorations*. A few familiar names are present — Robert Sheckley, Josef Nesvadba, Bob Shaw, Bertram Chandler,



and the Strugatsky brothers — but most will be entirely new to you, as will all SF from Romania, Uruguay, Bulgaria, Colombia, Singapore, and Hungary (not to mention most from Poland, Holland, France, China, Japan, Brazil, India, Sweden, and Yugoslavia).

Recommended.

Rating: ★★★★★

— ABO —

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Aborigines

(Continued from page 7)

(Small children in expensive restaurants don't thrill me either.)

Frequent ABO artist contributor Leslie Pardew illustrates "Nova Byzantium." When last we checked with Pardew, he had moved his family from Philadelphia to Provo, Utah. He says the lower cost of living in Utah gives him "a little room to breathe" as he works at getting his commercial art business going.

Pardew has several projects "on the vine," including some children's books and putting together a "studio" magazine for professional artists.



Steven R. Boyett

Man's evolution takes a giant, amusing leap backwards in Steven R. Boyett's "Minutes of the Last Meeting at Olduvai."

Boyett's writing career is also moving forward in reverse order.

He has written and sold novels for six years, but "Olduvai" is his first short story sale to a magazine.

Despite the lucrative financial rewards of writing novels versus short stories, Boyett says "The truth is, I enjoy writing short fiction more than writing novels."

His novels include *Ariel* (Ace Books, 1981), *The Architect of Sleep* and its sequel, *The Geog-*

raphy of Dreams.

Boyett says although "Olduvai" is a light story, it is the product of lots of research into theories of language origins.

He is working on several books now, including one called *Tricks*, with ABO columnist Jessie Horsting.

Boyett claims a serious interest in the martial arts and says he likes the diversion of washing dishes.

The illustrator for "Olduvai," and our cover artist, is Cortney Skinner. His work has been in every issue of ABO, and has graced two covers.

Skinner's latest project is a collaboration with longtime friend Geary Gravel. Gravel is the author of *The Alchemists* and *The Pathfinders*, the first two books of what is going to be a five-book series for Del Rey. The third book, *The Changelings*, is due out in March.

When Geary isn't writing, he works as a sign language interpreter for the deaf.

Skinner and Geary's book, which Skinner says they've "talked about for 10 years in many forms," is titled *Journal of the Windbud Expedition*.

"It's a novel presented in the form of sketches, drawings and paintings of an artist of the far future," Skinner says.

He says it was tradition in the past to bring artists along on expeditions, such as explorations of the American West, and Captain Cook's travels in the Pacific, to document the flora and fauna of the region.

Skinner says he has his work cut out for him. "It's going to be a long project."

The patience and ingenuity of Cub Scout den mothers is, in my opinion, an undervalued national resource. It is also the deserving subject of Joanne Mitchell's "Scout's Honor."

Mitchell says the story had its start in a conversation with a friend about female characters in current SF.

"The majority of female characters, we joked, are starship pilots, Amazon warriors, or Ph.D. scientists, while the few who are mothers seem to do their

mothering with a minimum of time and attention," she says.

Shortly after that conversation, "the character of Ann Novak started nudging the back of my



Joanne Mitchell

mind, asking if such a broad field as SF couldn't find a little room for someone who enjoys being 'just' a wife and mother and volunteer."

Mitchell, in fact, has a Ph.D. in chemistry and works as a technical writer at Kodak and a technical writing instructor at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Her husband, Gary, is a chemist at Kodak.

She has published two short stories in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (March 1980



Pat Morrissey

and August 3, 1981) as well as some "miscellaneous" non-SF,

and she is now working on a young adult SF novel.

Mitchell is the mother of two teenagers, and says she recently "survived my 16-year-old son getting his learner's permit."

Artist Pat Morrissey illustrates "Scout's Honor."

A woman who always has "strange things coming out of my head," (see picture) Morrissey is currently experimenting with multi-media in her fantasy paintings. She is applying items like jewelry, cloth, fur or lace to her canvases to give them a three-dimensional effect.

She is also working on art for two planetarium shows, one on



Bruce Boston

the history of science, with Leonard Nimoy as host, for the Gengres Planetarium in Hartford, Conn., and one on Johnny Appleseed for the Wallace Planetarium in Fitchburg, Mass.

War leaves lasting scars in "A Hero of the Spican Conflict," a poem by Bruce Boston.

Boston's books of poetry include *Nuclear Futures* (Velocities, 1987) and *All the Clocks are Melting* (Velocities, 1984) as well as two books of poems in search of a publisher, *The Nightmare Collector*, (horror poetry) and *Short Circuits* (prose poems).

Boston lives in California and says he has worked as a college professor, computer programmer, book buyer, furniture maker, gardener, retail clerk, movie projectionist and technical writer.

In case you're thinking that this guy needs to be more well rounded, I should mention his hobby, which is winemaking. He helped make a cabernet sauvignon (1982) which won a gold medal plus Best of Show for red wine at this year's California State Fair at Sacramento.

In the "What's Happening" department, Robert A. Heinlein has been doing a little behind-the-scenes politicking lately.

In early October, he was calling acquaintances in his capacity as treasurer for a committee whose purpose was to elect Jeanne Kirkpatrick president.

Heinlein was asking people to send Kirkpatrick a card or letter urging her to get into the presidential race.

He must have been disappointed, then, when the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations announced October 25 that she would not seek the Republican nomination for president.

Science Fiction Writers of America president Jane Yolen has been reaching milestones at an astounding pace lately.

In October she was the subject of a lengthy article in the *Boston Globe*. The writer interviewed her as she was about to deliver a talk on children's literature at Harvard University.

Yolen revealed that she was celebrating with a party for four reasons: she had just sold her 100th book, her husband, David Stemple, a University of Massachusetts professor, had turned 50 and received tenure, and they had been married for 25 years.

Yolen's children's books cover all ages. Her latest include the picture book, *Piggins*, about a pig butler who solves mysteries, her sixth book in the Commander Toad series aimed at beginning readers, *Commander Toad and the Space Pirates* and her third book in the Pit Dragon trilogy, *A Sending of Dragons*, a young adult SF/fantasy.

Since the *Globe* article appeared, Yolen has received a World Fantasy Award after being nominated in two categories. Her book, *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* (Pantheon,

1987) won in the special award, professional category.

And by early November, she had already outstripped October's impressive publishing record. "Since then I've sold my 104th book, and this week there is a good possibility I'll sell my 105th."

New York author Kiel Stuart has combined two loves, science fiction and bodybuilding, into some unusual tales that are being published in the magazine *Muscle Training Illustrated*. She says the first of these stories, "Death Spiral" made its debut in the August 1987 issue, followed by "Cutting Up" in the September issue.

"Bodybuilding and science fiction are both about expanding your horizons," says Stuart.

Could this be the start of a new sub-genre?

— ABO —

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Scout's Honor

By Joanne Mitchell

Art By Pat Morrissey

Ann Novak placed the pale blue neckerchief around the neck of her newest Cub Scout. Her fingers tried to avoid touching the crest of feathery tendrils growing from the back of his head, and she repressed a shudder as he looked up at her with his flat, black, lidless eyes.

"Welcome to Pack 43, Fillal," she said with a bright smile. She offered her right hand in the Cub Scout handshake, and managed to keep smiling as he slid his small, three-fingered hand into hers. His two opposing thumbs made the handshake awkward, and she quickly withdrew her hand. His skin had felt dry and warm, not slimy, but she resisted an urge to wipe her palm on her skirt.

"Why me?" she wondered, not for the first time, as she led him to join the other five boys in her den.

Except for Fillal, the monthly pack meeting was proceeding as usual. The parents of the 45 boys in the whole pack were seated uncomfortably on folding metal chairs in the gym of Franklin D. Roosevelt Elementary School. The boys were seated by dens on exercise mats in front of the parents, and, as usual, were more interested in poking and elbowing one another than in paying attention.

Ron, the Cubmaster, had leapt to the center and was enthusiastically trying to lead the group in a song.

"Oh, a Cub Scout went on a hiking trip, sing Polly Wolly Doodle all the day ..."

Fillal's parents were perched on two chairs at the end of a row, chairs that were not designed for heavily muscled legs with an extra joint. Their knees jutted upward and their heads towered a good foot above any of the humans, while their delicate forearms were tucked under their chins. Their bluish-skinned faces were void of any expression Ann could read. All the adult humans except Ron were sneaking curious glances at the aliens, while they in turn listened attentively to the song.

"... Polly Wolly Doodle all the day!"

Only a little more than a month ago two men from the State Department had rung Ann's doorbell.

Mr. Howard, the one in the navy blue suit with the maroon tie, sat primly on the front edge of the living room sofa. He said, "Mrs. Novak, are you familiar with the Falulli and their mission to Earth?"

"Well, yes, of course," Ann replied, flustered because they had caught her in the middle of cleaning her refrigerator. She tugged her old college sweatshirt down over her hips and wondered if she should offer them coffee. "It was on all the news when they landed

last year. They are studying us to see how civilized we are. Except I'm not sure what they mean by civilized."

"Exactly, Mrs. Novak. Exactly to the point," said Mr. Henderson, the one with the charcoal gray suit and the navy foulard print tie. "They have not communicated to us their criteria."

"However," said Mr. Howard, "you do understand the importance of their decision?"

Ann nodded. If humanity were deemed civilized enough, it would be invited to join a federation of sentient species that spanned the entire arm of the galaxy. All the blessings of an advanced technology would then be made available to Earth. If humanity failed the test, it would be placed under a quarantine: humans would be restricted to their own solar system and investigated again in one thousand years. It all seemed unreal to Ann, but the United Nations representatives were said to have received convincing proof of these claims.

"But what I don't understand," she said, "is why you're here talking to me about it."

Mr. Henderson continued blandly, as if she had not spoken. "Now that the initial excitement of their arrival has died down, the Falulli are ready for what they feel is the most important part of the test. They will be living among us, in locations chosen by them, to study the reactions of ordinary human beings over a period of time."

Ann tried to dismiss as ridiculous the suspicion that was forming in her mind. "Oh?"

Mr. Henderson said, "Two Falulli will be living and working on a Chinese commune. Two more will stay in Tijuana. Three will be in Leningrad, three more in a little town in Bavaria, and so forth."

Get to the point, Ann thought. "Would you please tell me just how this concerns me?"

Mr. Henderson said, "The United States is getting only two groups of Falulli. One pair intends to live in Point Barrow, Alaska. The other group, two adults and a child, will be living right here in Blairspport, New York."

"That's nice," Ann said, waiting for the catch.

"The child will be a fourth grader at the local school and will participate in local children's activities," said Mr. Howard.

"Like Cub Scouts," said Mr. Henderson.

"My Cub Scouts?" said Ann. "Oh, no, you don't. I agreed to do papier mache and woodworking, not aliens. I wouldn't know what to do with him."



Mr. Henderson leaned forward. "Mrs. Novak, you are the most suitable den leader we have available." He opened his briefcase and started pulling out papers. "Your family has a good reputation and an excellent credit rating. You yourself are well regarded for your work on the PTA, for your church, and for running the local blood drive. The only flaws we could find were the parking ticket you received last March and the unreported income you had last year from watching those two children after school."

Ann gasped.

"We need you," Mr. Henderson said.

"But ... but ... if I do it ... how would I treat him? What would I tell the other boys?"

"Just do your best. We know you can do it," Mr. Howard said soothingly. "Think of what this could mean ... a cure for cancer, an end to pollution, travel to other worlds, even ..." His voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. "Even, perhaps, the secret of immortality!"

"All depending on me?"

"We know you'll do all you can," Mr. Henderson said as he prepared to leave. He shook her hand warmly. "Here in America we have great faith in the ability of the common man ... er ... woman."

"Remember," said Mr. Howard, as he, too, shook her hand. "Your country is depending on you."

The next Wednesday afternoon, the time of the weekly den meeting, all the neighbors seemed to have an excuse to be in their yards, weeding, raking leaves, washing windows. Ann even had to chase several news photographers away from her front porch.

The boys arrived in a group, since Ann had given the others strict instructions to be polite and wait for Fillal after school. He walked quietly to one side, while the others were hopping and running and pushing and shouting. His blue uniform shirt fitted him so loosely across his narrow shoulders that Ann was tempted to take out needle and thread and alter it right then.

Ann knew the other boys well from the previous year of scouting: Scott and Eric, both lively, noisy, uninhibited; Andy, homely, slow in school, yet responding so well to a hug or a word of praise; Samuel, aloof and irritatingly bossy; and her own Timmy, sweet and shy and living in a fog of his own thoughts.

"Hey, Mrs. Novak," Scott called. "What do you call Batman and Robin after they've been run over with a steamroller?"

"I don't know. What?" she said.

"Flatman and Ribbon."

"Oh, that's pretty good, Scott," Ann said. "Quiet down, now, fellows. It's time to begin."

After the opening ceremony Scott, Eric and Andy ran for one side of the kitchen table. Ann frowned meaningfully at Timmy.

Timmy dutifully said, "Let's take this side, Fillal. Samuel, you sit here, too."

As Ann passed out the graham crackers and peanut butter and jelly, she started to summarize the year to come. "You all have your Bear Books, right? A lot of what you have to do to earn your bear badges

is similar to last year's work for the wolf badge. Remember how last year you had to accomplish twelve achievements? This year you have to do twelve, too. But this year you get to choose which twelve you want to do, out of the twenty-four listed in the book."

"Mrs. Novak, please?" Fillal was looking into the jar of peanut butter. "What is this? We do not eat anything which has been alive."

The other boys exploded into laughter. "Anything that's been alive!" Eric repeated, pounding Scott on the shoulder. "Wait! I'll tell the kids in school."

Fillal's head jerked upright and his crest stiffened. "Carnivore!" he said, staring unblinkingly at Eric.

Although Eric seemed uncertain of the meaning of the word, he knew when an insult had been intended.

"You ... you lizard," he sputtered. "You ..."

"Quiet!" Ann snapped. "It was a reasonable question. What would you boys do if you had to live somewhere so different from what you're used to? Fillal, that is a ground-up plant called peanut. You eat plants, don't you? It's just animals you don't eat? I'm told that it's safe for you to eat anything we eat, but if you don't like the taste of this peanut butter, you don't have to eat it."

He *did* look a little like a lizard, Ann thought. Or maybe like a praying mantis. She forced a smile as she handed Fillal a cracker spread with peanut butter, then wondered if he would interpret the smile as friendly reassurance or a threatening snarl.

Fillal tentatively nibbled a corner of cracker spread with peanut butter, but put the remainder down on the table. Scott snickered and nudged Eric.

"Boys..." Ann said warningly. When they quieted, she continued. "Today we're going to do some of the requirements from the Fitness Achievement. You can finish the rest with your parents if you want to."

Outside, in Ann's back yard, when she told them to divide into two teams, Eric and Scott and Andy immediately clumped together, shouting, "We're Team 1. We're number 1." Samuel and Timmy drifted toward Fillal, their reluctance to form Team 2 obvious.

"Did you know my doctor told me I should exercise with dumbbells?" Scott asked.

"Yeah?" Andy said.

"Sure. Want to go jogging with me?" He ducked, laughing, as Andy took a swing at him.

"First we're going to do some relay races," Ann said. "We'll do the kangaroo hop relay now. You have to put your hands on your hips and hop on both feet at once, like this." She hopped a few paces, ignoring Scott's laughter. "Got it, Scouts? Hop to the side fence and back, and then tag the next person on your team to go."

Ann signaled for the race to begin, and Scott and Samuel took off. The others cheered and jumped up and down from excitement. At the end of the first round, Team 1 was ahead. When Andy and Timmy finished the second round, Team 1 was even further ahead.

Fillal started the third round as anchorman for Team 2. With a few bounds from his powerful legs he had made up the difference between the two teams. He reached the finish line easily before Eric was halfway back from the fence.

"We won! We won!" Timmy and Samuel cried.

"You cheated!" Scott shouted. "That's unfair!"

Red-faced with rage, Eric joined in the cry. "Cheater, cheater, cheater!"

Andy started to follow the lead of his teammates, but was stopped by Ann, who had her hand upraised in the sign for silence.

"Boys! I am ashamed of you." She spoke quietly, but firmly. "This is not the way *Cub Scouts* should act. There was no cheating, according to the rules I set up. I want you to apologize."

After a long pause, Eric mumbled, "I'm sorry, Fillal."

"Me, too," said Scott. His eyes were fixed on the ground.

"The contest was unbalanced," Fillal said. The silvery fronds of his crest lay flat against his head, but his face seemed expressionless, as usual. "I can run faster than you humans can."

"Uh ... let's adjust the distances and try again," Ann suggested.

When Fillal had to cover twice the distance that the others did, the teams were more evenly matched. This time Team 2 won by only the narrowest of margins.

By similar handicapping, Ann led the teams through the crab walk relay races, the gorilla walk relay, and the individual thirty-yard dash, which she made into a sixty-yard dash for Fillal.

While the boys had a lemonade break in the shade, Ann checked the Bear Book. "Another part of this Fitness Achievement is to do some one-on-one contests. We've still got some time left in this meeting, so let's do some."

"Which?" Eric was reading over her shoulder as she sat on the grass. "The elbow wrestling! I want to elbow wrestle. I pick Fillal."

"No fair! I want to elbow wrestle with Fillal," shouted Andy.

"Just wait one minute," said Ann. She studied the illustration. Elbow wrestling involved two boys lying on their stomachs, heads toward each other, arm wrestling with elbows not allowed to leave the ground. Fillal's slender forearms probably wouldn't do very well at this one. "Since Fillal handicapped himself in the running races, don't you think it would be polite to give him an advantage here?"

"No. Let's do it just the way the book says to do it," said Eric.

Filal stared at him. "Do you think your big arms make you better than me? My friends warned me mammals would be like that."

"Who are you calling a mammal, you blue-skinned geek, you!" shouted Eric.

"Let's do a different contest," suggested Samuel, after Ann nudged him. "Here's one with back-to-back pushing."

"I want to elbow wrestle! I want to elbow wres-

tle!" shouted Eric.

"Me, too! Me, too!" said Scott.

"You always want to win everything, Eric. Showoff!" yelled Samuel.

Ann stood in the middle of the shouts with her hand raised in the Scout sign for silence. It was a full minute before they noticed and quieted.

"All right," she said softly. "I will not try to out-shout you. The meeting is over. You can all go home."

"But Mrs. Novak ..." Scott objected.

"Go away. All of you. No, not you, Timmy. Or you, Fillal. The rest of you. Just go."

Filal stood quietly before Ann as the others disappeared around the corner of the house. His face again seemed expressionless, but as she watched, a nictitating membrane slid up over his eyes, making her feel that he had shut her out.

"Fillal, I'm sorry. They were very rude to you. I hope you will still want to be one of us."

"It is no problem. I will be at the next meeting."

As he walked away, his shoulders seemed slumped and his crest was down. Why, he's only a little boy, she thought, amazed at the surge of protectiveness that the thought of his vulnerability roused in her.

Ann went into the house and poured herself a glass of iced tea. She carried it out to the porch, loosening her blue-and-gold uniform neckerchief with her other hand as she went. Sitting on the old glider in the autumn sunshine, she propped her feet on the railing and sipped her tea.

Civilized. What did that mean? Or, more to the point, what did the Falulli mean by it? Taking advantage of an opponent's weaknesses and getting him to grant concessions in his area of strength might be smart tactics, but was it civilized? Ann wondered how the Chinese commune and the Point Barrow Eskimos were doing in demonstrating human civilization to the Falulli. She certainly didn't feel cheerful about her contribution.

"Mom?" Timmy peered over the railing. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, not at you, honey. Come for a huggle." Timmy wriggled under her arm and she kissed his forehead. "How was school?"

"OK, I guess. Eric got mad in math."

"Oh?"

"He was at the board and made a mistake. Everybody laughed. And Fillal already knows fractions!"

"Someday you'll all understand fractions, too. Come on, you can help me make a salad. Daddy will be home soon."

The next Wednesday Ann picked her den up at school. "You'll like the nature center," she said as she drove her van out of the parking lot, ignoring the startled looks of the passing drivers when they noticed her passengers. "Visiting it will fulfill one of the requirements for the Wildlife Conservation Achievement, and you can finish the other requirements with your families if you want to. Now let's sing while we're driving there."

"Old MacDonald Had a Farm," "Cub Scout

Spirit," and "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall" kept the boys from fighting during the drive. Ann decided her headache was worth it.

In the visitor's center she showed them a sample bird feeder. "Next month you're each going to make one like this. You'll get to saw and pound nails and sand and varnish."

They bounced out of the building to walk the nature trail in such good humor that she had hopes the afternoon would go successfully. Their investigation of the beaver dam raised their spirits even higher.

On the return half of the trail, Ann paused by an old oak tree. "Look," she said, pointing to a hole by the roots. "What do you think that is?"

"A hole," said Andy.

"Somebody's house!" said Samuel, peering into it.

"A raccoon?"

"A rabbit?"

"A wildcat?"

"A bear?"

"It's too small for a bear," Ann said. "Probably a rabbit, but maybe something else lives here."

Scott said, "What happens when you pour boiling water down a rabbit hole?"

"What?" everyone chorused.

"You get hot cross bunnies!"

While everyone else groaned, Fillal said, "Please, why would you hurt these rabbits with boiling water? They are harmless animals, aren't they?"

Scott stared at him. "Boy, are you dumb."

"That's a joke. It's supposed to be funny," Eric said.

Andy said, "Don't you know *anything*?"

Fillal's crest suddenly lay flat.

"Boys, don't be rude," Ann said. "Remember, Fillal is new here."

While the others ran on ahead, giggling and teasing, Fillal walked beside Ann. They discussed hot cross buns, and the birds and trees around them. He's really rather sweet, she decided, and resisted the urge to give him a swift hug since she didn't know how he'd react. But what could she do about the other boys?

The next week Ann took the den on a litter cleanup as a public service project. They trudged along the hiking and biking path beside an abandoned canal, picking up paper and bottles and cans.

"Mrs. Novak, why are people so messy?" asked Samuel.

"I don't know," she answered. "Don't touch that one, Eric. It's broken. Let me get it with these heavy gloves."

"Look at the pile of cans I found!" Scott shouted. "We're going to be rich! A nickel each!"

"They might not all have a deposit on them," Ann warned. "Some might be from before the Bottle Bill was passed."

"Hey! Who are you pushing?" Scott said.

"I want to help you pick them up," Fillal said. "I'm sorry if I pushed you."

"You're always pushing your way in!" Eric rushed into the argument. "Think you're so great, don't you? Just 'cause you know fractions and

everything!"

"Why don't you go back where you came from?" Scott added, shoving Fillal's shoulder. "We don't want you here."

"Stop it," Ann said. "Stop it! I'm totally fed up with listening to your bickering!"

As she started toward the boys, she stepped too close to the edge of the bank. The ground was soft from all the recent rain. She felt the bank begin to give way beneath her. Dropping her litter bag, she clutched at a bush. It uprooted and she fell to her knees, all the while sliding toward the scummy water. "Ayiii!"

The water was cold, and stank. Ann gulped a breath just before she slid below the surface and then came up thrashing. Above her on the bank excited voices were calling.

"Mrs. Novak! Mrs. Novak!"

"Mom!" Timmy wailed.

This is absolutely the last straw, she thought. I give up! I quit! They can find themselves another den leader and another savior of the human race. I simply will not put up with these little monsters any more! In a flare of temper she slapped the water surface furiously with both hands, spraying water in her face again, which fueled her anger still more.

"Save her!" someone cried.

"Wait!" Fillal's voice rose above the rest. "Remember what the Bear Book says about water accidents?"

"Uh ... don't go into the water after someone?"

"Reach with something!" Timmy shouted.

"Reach with a stick or an oar."

"Or throw something that floats!" Andy said.

What were the boys doing? Ann treaded water for a minute, listening.

"There aren't any good sticks to use," said Samuel.

"Here," said Fillal, stripping off his scout shirt. "Your arms are strongest, Eric. Throw her one end of this."

Eric eased himself to the edge of the bank and tossed out the shirt while holding onto one cuff. It fell at least six feet short.

"Help!" she glubbed, splashing a little. Good heavens, she thought. They're actually trying to rescue me.

Scott grabbed onto Eric's other hand, and held while Eric inched closer toward the steep bank. He still couldn't reach Ann. Finally Eric held the shirt, Scott held Eric, Timmy and Andy held Scott, and Samuel held Timmy with one arm and hung onto a tree trunk with the other, all under Fillal's direction. They managed to lower Eric enough to reach Ann with the shirt sleeve. They all heaved, and she was pulled to the edge of the water.

"Oh, thank you," she said as she staggered upright. She clambered up the bank, dripping and filthy. "You boys were wonderful! It was so mucky there that I had trouble moving."

Eric shuffled his feet into the leaves of the path. "It was Fillal's idea," he admitted.

They all turned and stared at Fillal.

His crest dipped flat and then lifted, waving in the



breeze. "Did you hear about the man who made a million dollars selling Cheerios?" Fillal asked.

"What?" Scott said, blankly.

"He sold them as doughnut seeds," Fillal said.

There was a stunned silence as they all gawked at him.

"It's a joke," he said. "It's supposed to be funny."

Suddenly Scott exploded with laughter, and punched Fillal lightly on the shoulder. "Great," he said. "That's a good one."

"Let's get back to the van," Ann said. "I'm cold."

The boys picked up their litter bags and bounded ahead, running, hopping, punching, poking, laughing.

True Magic

(Continued from page 20)

toad through my ripped throat. The blood in my mouth tasted salty.

"I'll explain it once more," said Rasputin. "Thelma was right on all counts but one." He held up a single webbed finger. "Her chronology was wrong."

"Screw you," I answered.

The toad ignored my response. "Thelma thinks that this ability of your skewed brain comes from some new wiring of your neural network that has evolved due to the stress and strain of living in the modern world." He pressed his lips together and hissed.

Rasputin was a little bastard, but he could produce one wicked raspberry.

"Your brain isn't the next step in human evolution," said Rasputin. "Your brain is a holdover from a more primitive time. If you think modern life is tough, remember back to a time when you were huddled out on the frozen wastes of Europe, trying to outguess a cave bear that wanted you for dinner. Those were the days when true magic was needed. Those memories and abilities are buried deep within you. Remember your thesis?"

"Leave me alone," I pleaded. I wanted to die in peace, not spend my last minutes discussing cave bears and magic with a toad in a top hat.

"Try once more and I'll go," said Rasputin.

I nodded. I'd do anything to get rid of the toad.

"How many dimensions do you live in?" asked Rasputin.

We had been through this before. I knew the answer that the little bastard wanted to hear. "Four," I answered. It was pure bullshit, but I'd do anything to get rid of the little toad.

"And they are?" he asked.

"Height, width, depth, and yogurt," I answered. I had named the fourth dimension myself. It was a direction orthogonal to normal space. You could go in two directions in yogurt space, to the left was orange, and to the right was lemon. This was all pure crap.

Rasputin smiled. I was impressed. Smiling was no trivial task for a toad.

"Correct," said the toad. "My brain only allows me to see a fly that is moving. When the little critter wants to escape my perception it simply stops mov-

ing. In the same way, when that cave bear is charging, all you have to do is move into that direction orthogonal to the lower three dimensions, and the cave bear simply can't see you. If a Neanderthal can do it, so can you!" yelled Rasputin.

It was insane. If I could actually slip into the fourth dimension, I could leave the collar behind, then slip back into normal space somewhere else. It was impossible.

"It would be true magic to the cave bear," said Rasputin.

I closed my eyes. "Screw you," I said to the toad.

The toad was not pleased. A deep growl filled the room. It smelled damp fur.

I opened my eyes slowly. Down on all fours, its shaggy head scraped the ceiling. Spit dripped down its muzzle. The cave bear raised a paw that was as wide as my chest. It readied itself for a swipe.

"No!" I screamed.

Twelve-inch claws raced down.

I slipped into a yogurt sea. The world tasted lemon.

"Dr. Benford?"

My eyelids flashed open and I instinctively raised a hand to block the bear's blow. I could almost feel the razored claws slice through my forearm.

"I'm glad to see you awake, Dr. Benford."

I slowly lowered my arm.

A bearded face looked down at me. He had a wide stupid grin and sweat covered his forehead.

"Where's that damn bear?" I asked.

His smile widened, and his left eye began to tick convulsively.

I found myself laying beneath a starched cotton sheet, and an IV was stuck in my arm. The room reeked of antiseptic and ammonia. The notion of a talking toad and a charging cave bear rapidly faded.

"How'd I get in the hospital?" I asked, "and who the hell are you?"

The smile must have been permanently attached to his face. It didn't so much as quiver. He handed me a thick book. The cover felt like real leather.

"Your thesis," he said, having ignored my questions.

I slowly opened the cover, and, thumbing past the title page, came to the signatures. All four of my committee members had signed. The last signature location was reserved for Thelma but was filled by a

— ABO —

name that I didn't recognize.

"Who the hell is Bernard M. Rashtan?" I asked the bearded face.

"The Chancellor," he said.

My brain finally woke up. The stranger looking down on me instantly became the Chancellor. I'd seen pictures of him countless times in the *Tech Trib*, but never sweating the way he was now. I'd sweat too if one of my professors had just tried to murder a student.

"Have you got her in a padded cell?" I asked flatly. I had little doubt that he knew exactly what I was talking about.

The smile finally faded from his face. He nodded slowly.

"How come I'm not dead?" I asked tactlessly, hoping that the words would sting.

The Chancellor swallowed slowly and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I was having lunch with Thelma as I often do, and she made some mention about a special experiment she was running." He stopped talking and was unable to look me in the eye.

I had little sympathy for the man, someone who must have known about Thelma's insanity for years, but chose to look the other way. The empty and pained expression on his face made me cringe. He looked like an animal in a cage. It was an expression that I had little difficulty identifying with.

"You asked her for further details," I said, "and at that point I'm sure that she happily told you about the student she had bolted to the floor in a basement dungeon."

He nodded with an empty and drained face, but then I could see a question come to his eyes.

"Why do you say bolted to the floor?" he asked.

I reached up, and felt my bruised throat. "The damn collar she had around my throat," I said.

The Chancellor was obviously confused. "We found you a few feet on the other side of the door, a key clenched in one hand, and a ..." He sputtered to a halt, then pointed to my left.

I twisted in my bed, and bent toward the nightstand. A small glass bowl filled the table.

"Rasputin?" I asked, looking at the toad, but not quite believing what I saw.

The toad flicked out his tongue in greeting.

"Yes," said the Chancellor. "The toad was locked in your other hand."

I sagged into the bed. No one had gotten me out of the collar. I had done it myself.

"I see you're tired," said the Chancellor, "but I have a question that's been nagging at me for days."

"What?" I asked. I knew what it was going to be.

"You had the key. Why didn't you simply unlock the door?"

How could I tell him that I didn't unlock the door, because after I had slipped into the fourth dimension and somehow pulled Rasputin out of his terrarium, that when I returned to normal space and picked up the key, I must have collapsed before I could unlock the door?

"I don't know," I said simply. In a way it was the

truth. It must have happened, but I couldn't remember any of it.

The smile had returned to his face. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Just get some rest."

Turning, he walked through the room's swinging door.

I glanced over at Rasputin and again was greeted with a flick of his tongue. I slowly took a deep breath and smelled a scent that had not been there an instant before.

"Do you smell lemons and oranges?" I asked Rasputin.

He didn't answer.

— ABO —

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Sparrow

(Continued from page 15)

mound of black goo in the black ash. The kitchen table was cinders and coal; metal cans had exploded; the water bucket was melted flat. Black covered all, all save the bright gold and silver bands on my wrists. They hadn't taken them; they hadn't taken Petra's life, or Sparrow — by flames at least. I found no bones. But even if they were still alive, would I ever see them again? Should I? I was known to the Darwinists now, well known and living in an isolated location. They could return at any time, for any reason; they'd certainly keep a watch on me.... I could run, run again, run like I always had run every time some crazy bastard found out who I was. Run away from family and friends for fear that those who hated me would kill them, for fear that the curse that haunted me would kill whoever I dared to love, if I ever dared love again. I had had that boat longer than I had had my daughter — and now she was gone, too, gone like the rest of them, all gone, all gone, all lost long ago....

I sat amidst the ruin and mourned.

Miguel came when the sky was amber with storm clouds. He discovered that the Darwinists had only opened the seacocks on the *Dancer*. He would be glad to help me raise her. He would advance me the money for the salvage. He would be honored if I took his son as my first mate to replace Petra.

I looked at Miguel, and I saw in his face the truth that his son was a Fisher, too, gene-altered in his mother's womb, forever an orphan to the sea, to his parents' hope for a better life for their son.

I accepted his offer.

Maybe I should have left Xanadu behind me. Maybe it would have been the reasonable thing to do. But I was beyond reason; I could run no further. If the Darwinists or some other crazies wanted me, they could find me here. Alone.

We refloated the *Dancer*. I put a bunk in the cabin. I fished with Reynaldo. I got drunk every night.

They were waiting for me one morning, their voices filtering down to my cabin. They laughed with the squawk of gulls, their talk thick and fast, peppered with unknown words, fluid in the way operatic Italian is fluid. They spoke with voices too shrill to be beautiful, too melodic to be base human. Flyers.

I wanted to run and I had no place to go. I opened the hatch and looked out.

They were the colors of the rainbow — red, orange, blue, gold, green, a stunning purple — sometimes all mixed on one body, sometimes a color pure enough to break the heart. They were as short as three feet and as tall as five, but I don't think any of them weighed over fifty pounds. Sword hilts loomed over their shoulders, however, and their wings sported enough gold and silver to — to exactly match the design of Sparrow's bands, the bands I still wore.

I froze in the hatch, one foot on deck, one arm upraised, the Flyer gold glinting in the sun. They

stopped talking, their great eyes holding me, measuring me.

A Flyer as golden as Cochín drew himself up to his full height and spread his wings. "Mary Christobal Cochinka," he said with a voice of cloud and wind, "Mother of Fishers and she who once named herself Fisher, I ask your pardon for this early meeting. Know you that I am Daimyo Richard of the Sanchi nest, that which you know as the Santa Anna aerie."

I found myself nodding in agreement, even stepping onto the deck to greet him. He was... persuasive.

"I have come to ask a boon of you, Mary Cochinka —"

I halted, suddenly cold. "I have nothing left to give," I said.

"I speak more of a business venture, Honored One," Daimyo Richard said softly. "Perhaps I have used the wrong word."

I nodded stiffly.

He waited a few seconds, then continued. "We have previously bought fish from the Star of the Pacific Packing Company. When our contract expired, we found that our money was no longer valued. The manager of the company intimated that someone had made threats against him and his business if he continued to sell to us."

I knew Pete Kanzaros from my former life. He had come up from deck-hand to manage the Star, one of central California's biggest packing plants. He feared nothing... except, apparently, Darwinist threats. And Darwinist fire. I wondered for a second if they still used their visit to Christobal and Daughters Fishery and Cannery as an "example." It was probably too long ago for them, too lost in the damnation of time. I remembered, though. I remembered seeing Alice's body after the fire. After she couldn't run fast enough to outrace the flames.

Saint Francis had remembered, too.

"And you come to me," I asked, "wanting me to take the risk he found unacceptable?"

"I vow your safety, Honored One."

I said nothing. Alice had been my sister.

Richard regarded me with saucer eyes. "We know of recent events, Mary, and we share your sorrow. We bring you this token of our vow to you."

The calico Flyer stepped forward, lifting a heavy gray sack from her back. "I am called Kami, Spirit, of Aerie Sanchi. It falls to me to carry out the will of the aerie." She was the tallest and the most elegant in her movements, her mien overcoming the gaiety of her coloring. "It was my honor to take vengeance upon this one." Reaching her long-fingered hand into the bag, she drew forth the head of the Darwinist giant. "We understand that he was cruel unto you, that he attacked you when you could not defend yourself." She frowned. "He did not die... with honor. He squealed."

I nodded numbly. I could do nothing else. His eyes were closed. His lips were held together by an ornamental pin — a golden lightning bolt. His hair was swept up and braided with ribbons, giving Kami a convenient handle. His neck had been severed in one clean stroke. Mercifully, she put the head back into



the sack. "We had paid Pacific Packing ten silvers for every hundred pounds of fish they caught, for up to three hundred pounds a day, or one thousand five hundred pounds a week. We offer you twelve silvers for the same amounts."

I forced my eyes away from that bag. I forced my lungs to expand, my mouth to open. "They'd kill me."

She glanced briefly at Richard. "We vow your safety."

I shook my head, tears and anger battling for control of me. "Safety —" I choked. The anger won out: "Where were you when I needed you?" Their faces were stone, their voices silent. "Go away, damn you! Go away!"

I fled into the *Dancer*, bolting through my cabin, flying down the stairs, fleeing into the hot, smelly darkness of the hold.

The steps creaked. "Mary?" Richard's voice echoed hollowly behind me. "I wish to explain our actions to you. Please allow me to do so."

He stood illuminated in the hatchway; I was across the hold, at the engine. I knelt soundlessly and grabbed a wrench from the tool chest at my feet.

"Stay where you are," I warned. "Don't come any closer."

"I will not," he said tonelessly. "I am sorry you feel that you must raise weapon against me. But listen to my words, Mary, and be reassured."

"Get out of here!"

"Listen," he said softly, "And believe." He sighed. "It is a debt of honor that brings us here today, Mary. The actions of a nameless member of our nest have brought dishonor upon us all. Great dishonor that must be absolved. And only you can absolve us."

I said nothing.

"When word of your love spread among the People these fourteen years ago, Mary, we swore a vow to you — that no more harm should ever befall you as a result of others' hatred of us. Swimmer, Earth-Borne, Gossamer, Tenshi — all sworn to you. Swimmers watch the ocean before you, the Earth-Borne the ground beneath your feet, we Tenshi the sky above you. And beyond, even the Gossamer themselves watch over you. Should you be harmed, our revenge will be swift and terrible — as that throwback learned, as his fellows have learned before him."

"Seventeen times have we thwarted attacks on you, Mary. Most came when word of your love first spread among the walkers. It has been four years since the last attack. I offer that as an observation, not an excuse."

"Saint Francis is a fanatic; only he would risk our wrath. Our security failed that night at Miguel's."

"I see you in this darkness, Mary. I see you hold that wrench in your hands as if I were your enemy. Would that your guard had seen your real enemy in the darkness that was so much lighter than this. Their negligence was inexcusable; they chose to return their swords to the aerie."

"What is also inexcusable is our involvement in the attack upon you. That nest-less, band-less, nameless one attracted the Darwinists' attention to you once more. While we had cast her out of our nest, she

still bore wings. She is still... ours." His voice trailed off into the darkness. "We had thought to work a business deal with you. As if money could ease your pain." His voice actually broke. "What may we do for you, Mother Mary, that we may repay our debt to you?"

I knew the answer, but I asked anyway: "What does it mean, 'to return their swords to the aerie'?"

"A samurai's sword is lost only by death... or dishonor."

"Get out of my life!" I said. Then I screamed it: "Get out of my life!" I threw the wrench. It struck sparks off the hull where it hit.

"Mary —" He was beside me, gliding to me on soundless wings. "That is the one thing you cannot ask of us. We are pledged to you. You saw how the Darwinists treated you when you fell into their hands accidentally. Should you order us to leave you, they would know. They would be here tomorrow. They are cruel, Mary, and Saint Francis is the worst of all. You gave your love freely, Mary. Let our gift to you be just as freely given."

I could see him before me in the dim light of the hold. His head came barely up to my breasts, his folded wings reaching to my shoulder. He was so small, and yet so regal; I was so big, so worthless.

"Do not honor me," I said softly, tonelessly. "Do not pay tribute to me. I am not worth it. My love for Cochín — if it was love, if it wasn't just a stupid teenage crush — killed him. I killed him." I laughed. Or maybe I broke. "I have enough blood on my hands. Don't stain me even more."

"Mary," Richard's voice was somehow less regal, somehow more private, more a man. "You took in Suzume — Sparrow — when I had to cast her out. You kept her alive when I was duty-bound to kill her for her crimes. She is my wife, Mary. My wife. For that alone I am yours to command."

I could not speak, could not throw off this new burden. A voice that was not mine came out of my mouth. "Go find Petra, then. She was the one who insisted we take her in. I was too drunk to decide. And too scared when I was sober to throw her out."

It was Richard's turn to pause. He said stiffly: "Then we shall find Petra for you. For her sake, we will keep you from harm." He paused again. "Of what was said here, I shall say nothing. Your honor is... your own concern. I am not your judge."

"Or I'd be asked to 'return my sword'?"

"If you had earned one in the first place," Richard replied tonelessly. "Good day." He bowed to me — I felt the breeze stirred by his movements.

I said nothing.

He left, as soundlessly as before.

I signed the contract, later, with Kami. After all, I had to eat.

Petra came home to me two months later, clambering up the side of the boat after the moon had set. Sparrow was in labor and Petra didn't know what to do — all her people were too far away to get to them in time. She didn't want to alert the Darwinists, but... could I come?

I went.

The trip was silent, with only the rush of cool air from the organics of my breather vest, with only the swish of her strong tail carrying us easily along in the dark waters. Moonlight revealed a rocky wall of shadows, caves, and cul-de-sacs; Petra picked out the right shadow with ease. She released me in the darkness and I surfaced to a grotto filled with the pearly glow of Fisher lighting — and filled with many other things besides. The *Dancer's* old radio mast was wedged between rocks, roughly horizontal, a foot off the floor to serve as a perch. My old beer cooler held clear water — my canteen lay beside it. I saw books, a radio, dried food, all in a living area maybe 20 feet square. I couldn't imagine living for two months in this rocky grave. Petra surfaced behind me. "I have to go get Sparrow," she announced. I lifted myself out of the water and sat on the rocky edge; I think she knew that I understood her precautions against any hypothetical followers. They — whoever they were — would find me. Sparrow would be safe. Unless, of course, they knew enough to hang back and wait... I started to warn Petra, but she was already gone. Silently, soundlessly, safely.

Cautiously, I began to creep back out the cave mouth. I didn't dare swim too far out; I didn't want to get lost in unfamiliar water. But what I saw outside the cave almost convinced me I had lost something else: Sparrow was flying toward me — underwater. Only the sight of her breather vest convinced me of my sanity. I backed into the cave again to give them room to enter.

Petra surfaced first, then Sparrow beside her, her crest suffering greatly from the confines of the helmet. Her belly was huge. I leaned down to help her from the water. She ignored my hand and gained her feet by herself, stretching her wings out to their fullest. Water ran from her.

"Her skin secretes oil," Petra said softly. "She's naturally water repellent. We've been swimming a lot together."

Sparrow moaned with the pain of a contraction. This time she did take my hand.

Two hours later, I delivered her child. He was pink-skinned and chubby, with only his oversized eyes and bare wings showing that he was other than baseline human. I laid him in his mother's arms, showing her how to cradle his head, how to set the nipple in his mouth so that he could nurse and breathe at the same time. Sparrow did as she was told, exhaustion showing on her face and in the steady tremor of her hands.

"I do not want this child," she said firmly, looking up at me with pale green eyes. "It has robbed me of all that I am and all that I ever wanted to be. Take it to Sanchi nest and give it to the Daimyo. He wanted it. He always wanted it!"

"And what about your bands and your sword, Sparrow?" I asked.

"The bands are his," Sparrow replied, her voice as harsh as the walls surrounding us. "Let me use my sword but once more and you may return it to the aerie also."

"A motherless child is a dying child," I said. "Live for him."

"No! I have lived long enough for this child. I will not live any longer for him. I will not sell myself into slavery to him also."

She would not meet my eyes. She stared down at the helpless bundle she held. "Is motherhood so terrible?" I asked.

Without pause she replied, "If law and custom had allowed, I would have washed this infant from me when it was but a few cells." Her voice was low with anger. "And I prayed that it would be abnormal. When it was not, I exercised and did violent calisthenics so that I might dislodge it. But it stayed, firm and secure in my belly. In my desperation I went among your people and sought an abortionist. I was arrested and held by my people, alas, before the procedure could be done."

I looked over to Petra. Her face was hard.

"So why did you escape again? Why did you come to us?"

"So that I could at least have the honor of seppuku after the birth. My people would not permit it — I may not die by my own hand. I must live. For him."

"And you think that I will stand by and let you kill yourself?"

"You have no say in the matter." She looked up at me at last, anger in her eyes. "I did not wish you here. Petra — panicked and went to get you."

"But what about his life?"

"It will go to the surface. You need only bring him to the attention of the other Flyers."

I waited until she understood my question.

"I have heard that question so many times," Sparrow sighed. "And my reply has always been the same: but what about my life? My skills — my training — my hopes and desires — are they all for nothing? Am I nothing less than a reproductive machine?"

"Are you nothing more?"

"A warrior too fat to fly even with the oldsters' wing, too slow to fly with the children, my muscles too flaccid to even be able to perform chores." Silent tears flowed down her face, glittering in the glow light. The child nursed on, undisturbed. "I did nothing wrong! I wanted nothing wrong — nothing but my life! Am I so insane? Too dangerous to be allowed my freedom because of that?"

I, at least, had still been able to pull a net. "After Cochín died," I said softly. "After I knew that I had killed him, his mother came to me. She told me that such was the fate for all the Fisher men — that their women could only conceive on dry land. She asked me if I would help them solve the problem. If I would donate my eggs to them. For research."

Petra inhaled sharply.

"They wanted to breed a new generation of Fishers who could tolerate air for a brief time — to make their race independent of the engineer's control, I guess. Free breeding. All I wanted to do was to mother Cochín's child."

"I agreed to the experimentation. When they went to harvest the eggs, though, they found out I was al-

ready pregnant. With Cochín's child." I touched Petra's face, closed my eyes, felt her hand cover mine. "It wasn't you." I said softly. "I aborted. Spontaneously in the fifth week. They couldn't save him. Too incompatible. But they took my eggs and they kept them alive and they tinkered with them. Until the genes were compatible. Until they got an air-breathing Fisher." I opened my eyes. "I wanted to carry you. I wanted to nurse you. But I couldn't. I wasn't even given the chance to try."

Petra was barely breathing. "They never told me."

"No." I shook my head. "That was part of the deal. I sold them my eggs — my genotype — on the condition that everyone be told that you were my daughter. By Cochín."

"It is a lie, then?" Sparrow asked.

"Our love? No." I sighed. "They just didn't mention a few generations in between the love and the love child." I spoke to Petra.

"Until this summer, until you came to me — I hated you. Hated you for what I thought you had stolen from me. My life, my dreams, the companionship of my family, my friends, even my neighbors." She didn't even look surprised at my words. "No one expected the reaction that came with your birth. The Darwinists' hate — yes. But not the love. Not the vows."

"But my life isn't your fault, Petra. It's mine. I didn't know what to do... afterwards. I — I wasn't strong. I hate my life. Have hated it for years. I wanted to travel, to go to the university, to read books again.... I don't know if I ever can — if they'll ever let me be free, but I am still alive. Doesn't life itself count?"

"You call the way you live a 'life,' Mary?" Petra said scornfully. I opened my mouth, closed it. "A fingerling learning to swim gives more to the world than you do! You're a drunk — a lout! A liar! You contribute nothing! How Cochín could have loved you —" I turned my face from her. Away from the truth. The words stopped.

The child whimpered.

I looked at him. "If you've been 'flying' every day, Suzumi," I asked softly, "won't that affect your muscle tone? Won't you even ask to be readmitted to the aerie?"

"Tenshi do not ask to be readmitted to the nest," Sparrow replied. "We challenge. And the penalty for failure is death."

"So?" I handed her the unsheathed sword. She took it, one-handed. Slowly she laid it in her lap. The baby finished nursing and lay back in her arms, asleep. She looked at it, cradling it beside the gleaming steel.

"It is said among us that the price of life is forgiveness. When absolution is not possible, honor demands death." She looked up to me, measuring me with her eyes. She spoke to Petra: "Let us see if I can earn my absolution."

I fished. Sparrow flew safe — and shunned — and she gained strength day by day. Her son grew swiftly.

His feathers, when they did grow in, were a mottled gold and white. By summer, Sparrow was ready to challenge Richard for her rightful place in his warrior's guard. She stood with us as Kami brought me money for the week's catch: almost two thousand dollars. Kami did not speak to her, nor did Sparrow speak at all, but Richard waited for us on the dock the next morning, flanked by his guard.

I led the way, carrying Sparrow's sword in my hands. She had spent most of the last night polishing and sharpening it. Petra followed me, little Cochín in her arms, Sparrow's warrior bands encompassing his fledgling wings. Sparrow followed, her head up, her back straight, her muscles taut with training.

She had coached me on what to say. "Ohayo, Daimyo," I said, bowing slightly.

"Good morning, Mary," Richard returned.

I breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't shouting, at least; he wasn't ordering Sparrow's immediate execution. "A warrior's sword, of your aerie, has come under my protection," I started. "I wish to return it to its rightful owners." I handed him the sword — rather, I held it out to him. He waved a guard forward to take it. The Flyer passed the scabbard to Richard; he unsheathed the blade. It shone like the fine steel it was.

"Would that the soul of she-who-wielded it were so bright," Richard said, his eyes on mine. "She was one of my finest Warriors." He sheathed it, passed it back to the guard.

I felt a breeze stir my hair, saw it ruffle the feathers of those who stood before me. "Daimyo, also into my care has passed an infant of your race, whom I believe to be of your aerie." I could hear Petra's feet flip-flopping on the dock beside me. "He has been named 'Cochín' by his mother." My throat tightened over the name, and then tightened even more when I saw how Cochín's gold matched Richard's.

Kami stepped forward to take Cochín from Petra; Richard waved her back and took Cochín in his own arms. Petra stood for a second beside him, her eyes drinking in the sight. Richard laid one hand on her shoulder. "Hai, Mary. This child is of my aerie. The bands mark him so. He will be raised as samurai of the highest order; he bears a proud name. My thanks to Petra for his care." He paused. "Each child is precious to us, for our women pay dearly for them. We need our children, for the aerie must grow, but it is hard to trade the health or life or love of a wife for a son..." I was glad he was looking down. "...Or a daughter." He patted Petra on the shoulder and stepped back from her. "We shall go now."

He looked up at me. I knew he wanted me to give him a way out, to give him his wife back as well as his son. I bowed low. "Daimyo, by your leave and by my daughter's honor, I ask of you a great boon."

"Mary Cristobal Cochinka, mother of Fishers and she who once named herself 'Fisher,' my aerie is yours for the asking."

He had given me enough rope to hang both of us.

"Daimyo, I ask for your acceptance of a nameless one into your aerie. I ask that this nameless one be tested for her skills and training as a samurai." I watched Richard's face: first nonchalance, then con-

cern. "I ask that the nameless one be allowed to issue challenge to join your guard." Now disbelief. "I ask that her name be returned to her." And finally, anger.

"Know you," he said softly, "that the Flyer's life is contained in the aerie bands. That a samurai's soul is in the sword, that a tenshi's honor is in the name. A nameless, swordless, bandless Flyer has broken so many of our laws, so many of our trusts, so many of our bonds that she is dead to us."

"Then I ask for a resurrection," I replied. "A new life, new laws, new trusts. New bonds."

"You ask too much, Mary Christobal Cochinka."

"I promise much."

"Do you seek to regain your honor here, false savior?" he barked. "Or will you repent of this act also for the rest of your days?"

I couldn't answer.

"She is under a sentence of death. If I even admit that I see her here in our presence, I must order her death. How do you guarantee that she is worthy of life?"

When does a life gain meaning? Is it when you accomplish your own goals, or when you make a sacrifice so that others can achieve their goals? Sparrow had her goal, but little else; I had little to offer but my sacrifice.

Wordlessly I knelt before Richard and swept the hair from my neck. I closed my eyes as I felt a hairline of steel touch my skin. "I tell you now," Richard said tonelessly, "that if the nameless one is successful, you will have my thanks, the thanks of my aerie, the thanks of all tenshi. We shall name you 'Angel.' But if she fails, the wings will be struck from her back and she will be cast from the nest to die on the rocks below. Then I will come to collect what you have offered today."

The blade rose from my skin. I sat down in the sand, vaguely feeling Petra's arms around me, vaguely feeling her tears.

Richard turned to his wife for the first time. "Come with us now, nameless one, so that we might test your worthiness as Flyer, samurai, tenshi and guard, knowing as you do the price you must be prepared to pay for failure."

"Hai, Daimyo," she bowed. "No price is too high for me to pay. I ask that you Mary—"

"No!" Richard cut her off. "Her word is freely given. You would demean her honor by asking that I not accept it. Strive instead to fulfill your avowed duty so that all will know the value of her life." His eyes met mine. "I believe that even she does not realize the strength of her love. Or of her honor." He bowed to me, long and low. "Farewell." His guards followed suit; they launched themselves into the air as one, even Sparrow, even Suzume.

But I was afraid then, more afraid than I had been when I felt Richard's sword upon my neck, than when I had first held Suzume on my front porch, than when I had spent the first night willingly without the consolation of a drink. I wanted no more misplaced thanks, no more wrongful adulation, no more false worship.

No more protection.

*** *****

I saw Suzume recently, from a distance, as I was hiking near the aerie. She flew bravely and free, the sun glinting off her gold and silver bands. Richard flew with her. They were making love in the air.

Pregnant Flyers "flew" with the Fishers now, breather vests and the weightless water keeping their muscles strong through those last months. Their men keep them company; Petra says the Fishers are complaining about the noise and the crowding — as they build hotels in the shallows for their "vacationers."

I left Petra, left her to her Fisher family and friends, left her to her schooling and her business. She's sixteen now, legally adult, legally able to own Cochinka Fisheries. She makes a lot of money, supplying fish to walkers and Flyers — and I hear, even Diggers, too. I left her the business in my will.

I died. I had another fire, this time aboard the *Dancer II*. As she burned, I walked away. "Walked," not "swam" or "flew." Walked away, free at last.

Petra watched me go. She says she loves me, despite it all, and I know that she was hurt by my decision. But she's reached the age where she wants to be independent; I think she understands my delayed adolescence. I hope she does. She'll keep it secret, at least. She promised me that much.

I call myself "Suzi" now, after the sparrow that fell into my life. I'm going hiking across the mountains in a couple of days. I've always wanted to see the desert.

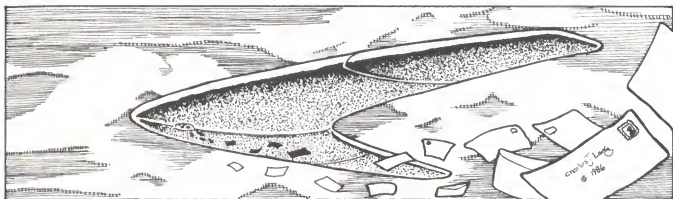
— ABO —

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Boomerangs

Comments From Our Readers

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Thanks a lot; you've ruined my weekend! Here I was getting ready for my move. Instead, when I got home Friday night, in my mail box were the issues of *ABO* I had ordered. I've literally not done a thing but read your wonderful magazine.

A couple of comments. I applaud the move to the smaller format. It is much more manageable than the tabloid size and, I suspect, less prone to mutilation and manglings in the mail. I also hope you will resist the temptation that the other fiction magazines have succumbed to, namely the serial. Keep those short stories short and readable. (*We have no plans to serialize novels.* — Ed.)

I have also enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the writer's guidelines. Mr. Clement's "Home System" seems intriguing and I would like to try my hand (although I think I'd like to sneak a peak at the semi-mythical "figure six" at some point).

Keep in all, a job well done. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
D. Curtis Jamison
Denver, Colo.

Dear Alien Publisher,

I love your new magazine. It

is by far the best SF magazine to hit the stands in quite some time.

Best regards,
Ron A. Lee
East Aurora, N.Y.

Dear Charlie,

I'd always believed levitation was an old parlor trick, but I could have sworn I saw my Sept./Oct. issue of *ABO* floating a few inches above the coffee table.

The ethereal figures on the cover should have been a dead giveaway — but did I pay attention?

Do frogs have feathers?

O.K., so I found out the hard way ... I read the stories. By the time I finished the last "spacy" line ("*Spacy*" as in "outer" or as in "weird?" — Ed.), I found that I was floating a few inches above the sofa. Neat stuff, that fantasy game. (*Sorry, only SF is allowed here, no fantasy.* — Ed.)

I want to leave the issue around for others to enjoy, so I'll have to close for now ... I gotta go out in the yard an' dig up a big rock. Can't risk losing such a good issue!

Think anybody else'll get a rise out of it? (*Of course* — Ed.)

Yours,
Lillian McManus
Westwood, N.J.

To the editors:

I think (by far) this is the nicest put-together SF magazine that I've ever seen! I just wanted to say "Keep up the good work!" (*Actually, a lot of people are beginning to agree. Robert Coulson has twice stated in his Comic Buyer's Guide review column that ABO "... has the best interior art in the (SF) field..."* — Ed.)

Yours sincerely,
Sharon A. Gentry
Niland, Calif.

P.S. I also loved the stories!

Respected friends,

I think it would be very nice of me to write and say how very nice of you to send me *Aboriginal*, and so I have done so.

In regard to Darrell Schweitzer's comment on "sequelitis," what about the author who has done a book which is not a sequel but his publisher says (all over the dust jacket) that it is: namely me? I am really far too nice to point out that this book, although it came out last January, has not been reviewed in your magazine; hence does not serve to face the problem. In fact, I won't even mention title or publisher because that might be cheating. And I'm far too nice to cheat. (*Did your publisher send Darrell a review copy? I didn't get one here.* — Ed.)

Keep up the good work and thank you again.

Avram Davidson
Retsil, Wash.

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Thank you for printing my letter in your December 1986 issue (*ABO* #2). You may have saved the Earth. If you remember, I wrote about my friend, Ferdie the alien, who was hooked on Styrofoam and elastic (*Kinky friend* — Ed.) and then got religion (*Not so kinky* — Ed.). I asked your readers for advice on how to contact Ferdie's family to let them know what's going on.

Fortunately, someone took me seriously (*It wasn't us. One alien's enough.* — Ed.). A physics major at Cornell University, Joe Wincowski, sent a truly helpful suggestion.

He said, "It seems to me that Ferdie is not an engineer, but a spoiled rich kid. His spacecraft should be designed for laymen, and almost certainly has a radio of some kind. If the alien psychology is as humanoid as you describe, this radio should be easy to identify and operate to contact Ferdie's home planet."

Right. Only Ferdie had already left for Zeta Reticuli with that cult recruiter from the Hm'na-ha when I got Joe's letter. (Hm'na-ha is the closest I can spell the word. It sounds like gagging on a hairball if you say it right.) (*Isn't that special.* — Ed.)

Then it occurred to me that the recruiter must have had his own spacecraft. If he took Ferdie with him, that would have left Ferdie's craft here. It was worth looking for.

So I went over the back pasture with a metal detector and a couple of ranch hands with shovels. (Ferdie had told me his craft was buried out there.) When we dug it up, it looked rather like eight washing machines stitched together with vacuum cleaner hoses. (*Maybe it was?* — Ed.) Didn't look very spaceworthy. But then I've never actually seen it move — for all I know, it just "pops" from one place to

another. That could be right, the thing is bigger on the inside than the outside. (*Shades of Dr. Who.* — Ed.) Joe was right about the radio. I pushed the obvious button, the radio lit up, and someone answered my call almost immediately.

Then I discovered a difficulty Joe didn't think of. I don't know the language. I exchanged a lot of gibberish (*Now we're getting somewhere.* — Ed.) with the being on the other end before he hooked in some kind of translator, and suddenly we could understand each other. He turned out to be Ferdie's best disreputable friend. I'll call him Raouf. He agreed to get a message to the Arch-Families. (For Ferdie to hang out on a primitive planet to get stoned is one thing, but endangering his planet's political structure is something else.)

Apparently Ferdie's father is some high muck-a-muck equivalent to President of the Planetary Council — and the position is hereditary. A Hm'na-ha President would take over their world and divert its entire resources to converting other intelligent species.

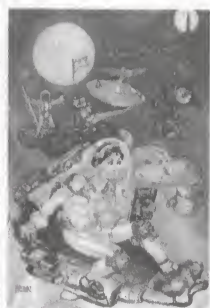
Well I've done what I can. I hope Ferdie's family can get him out of that cult before he signs over all his holdings. I don't like the idea of a fleet of Hm'na-ha recruiters coming to convert the Earth. (*They'd have to get in line.* — Ed.)

So your printing of my previous letter could have saved the Earth. But I may not be through with this yet. It has occurred to me that someone will show up sooner or later for Ferdie's spacecraft. (*Looking for a missing sock, perhaps?* — Ed.) Maybe I should send the ranch hands out to bury it again. (*Good idea.* — Ed.)

Sincerely (*We doubt it.* — Ed.),

Danger Zone
Lufkin, Texas

— ABO —



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More Art on Page 64



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